

KATERA REBELLING

BOOK TWO



J.D. EVERGREEN

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Other books in this series

Book one [Katera Rising](#)

Book two Katera Rebelling

Book Three Katera Returning (coming soon)

Prequals.

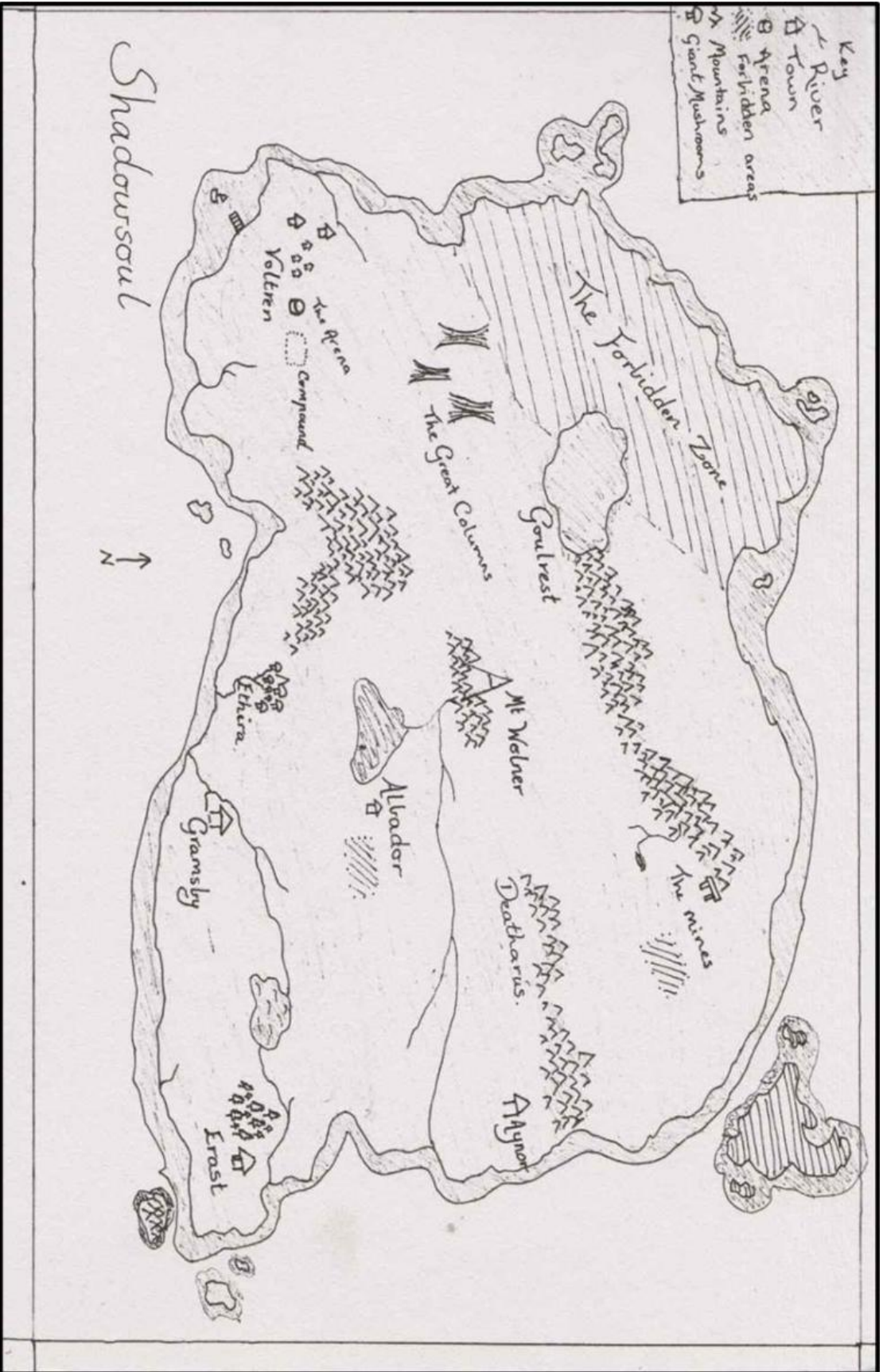
Want to know more about Taliah the Great? Check out [Katera](#)

Short story about Claire prior to escaping the compound.

[Claire of Katera](#)

Dedication

For all the LGBTQIA+ looking for a book that has characters like them.



Chapter One

I twirl the sapphire gemstone in my fingers, letting the cool chain curl around my hand with the movement. Once again, I am amazed at how such a small object can place such a heavy burden upon me. This little gem and its five siblings are the only things standing between the freedom of our people and the destruction of our world.

Too bad we have no idea where the last three are.

Darkmor's oppression of our people continues even with the threat of uprising swirling round his hooved feet. I sigh and run my finger along the jagged scar on my wrist. One of many I had gained through my time imprisoned as a gladiator under Darkmor and his monstrous minions.

So much has changed since my mother begged me to flee before the guards dragged her off for interrogation, a process that very few have ever returned from. I lost my mother because I won my last gladiator match. I shake my head and sit back, staring into the fire as the flames playfully leap across the logs.

A loud commotion draws my attention from the flames, and my eyes land on my companions—the rebels who had rescued me after my disastrous attempt at escaping the compound where I was imprisoned. My hand grips the scars on my thigh as I recall the burning sensation of the ceribi's venom worming its way into my leg. I squeeze my eyes shut as a flash of fur and teeth force its way to the front of my mind. I am haunted by this memory. Even if I live through the uprising and see Darkmor overthrown, a part of me knows that I will never truly escape him. Or all the horrors I lived through because of him.

I glance at Lexa and smile as she leans over the table and makes another mark on the map. Still, my future is looking better than it did a few months ago.

Since Darkmor invaded the rebel camp, my companions and I have been on the run, searching for the other legendary gems. Supposedly, when brought together, they possess the power to overthrow Darkmor and end his tyranny. While I can't be sure about the truth of the ancient legends, I am certain that these gems hold some form of power. When we wear them, we gain abilities upon contact with someone else who possesses a gem.

Lexa and I create a shield that can stop almost anything from harming or seeing us. The problem is, it comes with a price.

Using the gems causes magical wounds to erupt over our bodies. Painful gashes open on our skin, and out of them pours magical energy. It is not a pleasant experience, and it can take days to recover. Recently Lucas has acquired a gemstone, which displayed an unnerving intelligence in its selection of him. It makes me wonder if the gems are a little more alive than I once believed.

It has been nice staying put after months of traveling. The need for recuperation and information made the stop essential. I know we won't be able to stay forever, and I will miss this place when we leave. It has become a little bit like a home. There are routines and chores, but also security, happiness, and purpose.

I take a sip from the wooden cup and place it on the table and peer down at the map Lexa has spread across the table, each corner is weighted with three white glowing crystals and a cup. Her long finger traces a line between us and the safest route to Mount Wolner through the caverns of Shadowsoul. I can see she has already plotted a path there, but getting up the mountain will be difficult. The map gives no indication as to a path and the sides may be treacherous to climb.

Nathanial stomps into the little mud hut that has become our temporary headquarters and slams his giant fist down on the balooga table. Malt whisky leaps from the cup in front of me to splash across the wooden surface. I look at the spilt drink with disappointment. It is a rare occasion for Lucas to make an alcoholic beverage that is actually palatable and now the last of it lay puddled across the table.

"I can't believe it," Nathanial mutters thumping the wood, the action rattling everything on the table again.

Hurriedly, I grab the map I had been studying and hold it in the air protectively, crystals roll off the corners and clink against each other as they bounce on the table. Glaring up at the tall and heavily muscled man I ask, "What?"

He lifts his massive hand from the table, and I am sure he has left a slight indent in the wood. Nathanial paces back and forth across the tiny room, running a hand through his short black beard. "I just came back from the meeting with Edward and the two reporters from the rebel encampment," he says.

“And?” Melissa prompts as she slowly works a whetstone over one of her many daggers, her black curled hair standing in stark contrast to her pale face.

I glance back at Nathaniel. His shoulders are so tense I can see the fabric of his shirt straining against them. “Those monsters,” he fumes pacing the room rapidly. “Those monsters,” he repeats through clenched teeth as if that is somehow enough information for us all to share his anger.

“Nathaniel you will need to be clearer than that,” Lexa states as she comes to sit beside me, her shoulder brushes mine, and a small tingle travels through my arm. “Since the beginning of our journey, we have encountered many monsters.”

Nathaniel finally pauses and gathers himself. “Darkmor has enlisted Eleeza’s.”

The room is tense and silent for a long moment, and everyone looks taken back, and disgusted by the news. The fire crackles and I watch as anger grows on the faces around me.

“What is an Eleeza?” I ask.

“Eleeza’s can change their shape. They are well known for breeding chaos where there otherwise would be none,” Lucas mutters darkly taking off his glasses to clean them, his eyes looking tiny without them.

“So, they are shape shifters?” I clarify leaning back in my chair.

Lexa’s green eyes look at me. “Claire, Eleeza’s are much worse than shapeshifters. Normal shapeshifters can turn into any animal of their choice. However, they are limited to the forms of animals.”

“But Eleeza’s take the form of people and other humanoid creatures,” Melissa elaborates. “They can take the face of your best friend and learn your vulnerabilities, and once they know where you are weak, they strike.”

Tash brings over a warm drink for her and Nathaniel. She holds the cup out, and he stops pacing to take it from her with a gentle smile.

Tash returns his smile before plonking in a chair, her many belts clattering against it and says, “They can’t hold a shape for very long though. Even the strongest of them must reform every five or so days.”

Nathaniel leans over the table his eyes serious. “Their game plan is children. They are using children as young as six to fight their war because they know the rebels won’t fight against them.” He takes a deep breath. “Apparently, these children will be armed with automatic projectiles,

similar to the ones we seen attached to the flying contraption that attacked us at the foot of the birthing grounds.”

That stuns the room into silence.

Nathanial takes a deep breath, and I can finally see why he is so agitated. “In amongst the children are Eleeza’s, spreading fear, panic, and confusion. They are so crafty and manipulative it is hard to tell friend from foe after a single conversation with one. I cannot imagine the minds of children holding up against that kind of onslaught.”

I swallow. “So, they have put a bunch of young, confused and terrified children on the frontlines of Darkmor's army and they are made to fight against the very people who would free them?”

Nathanial nods.

“Disgusting,” Lucas mutters.

“Who uses children to fight their battles?” Tash asks in horror.

“Darkmor,” I answer.

“Eleeza’s,” comes Lexa's pairing reply.

I stare at the table as silence descends the room, only Nathanial's rapid pacing and the steady crackle of the small fire in the hearth break it. I shouldn't be surprised that Darkmor would put children in his army. After all, he had me training as a gladiator from as young as four. But even with this knowledge, and having lived through it, the fact that he would send children to war still horrifies me.

“How did you come by this information?” Lexa asks leaning forward and placing her elbows on her knees.

Nathanial rubs his stubbled chin. “The rebels have just reported that their attempts to liberate the people from the gladiator compound were thwarted by the child army.” He crosses his arms and adds, “They managed to capture and bring back two of the children, but the state of their minds may not be salvageable.”

“Yet, salvage them they must,” Lexa says. Her gaze meeting Nathanial's in a way that leaves absolutely no room for argument. “Ask for a woman to volunteer to become a companion to the children. Someone who has had children of her own. No more interrogations for the children, the understanding that they are safe is to be given top priority.”

“That would go a long way towards helping,” I say. “Maybe once they feel safe with the rebels, they will reveal what they know.”

Nathanial nods. "The report also says they have had glimpses of a child army at the mining compound." He paces with his cup firmly clenched in his hand. "We need that ore to make weapons for our army and yet..." his words drift off and he doesn't finish the sentence.

"This is bad," I say quietly.

Lexa nods. "The rebels will have to find a way to liberate the children. No one could be asked to fight against them."

Nathanial looks at Lexa imploringly. "If you would just allow me to tell them you are alive—."

"No," Lexa cuts him off. "What I am doing here is too important, and Samuel is well and able to maintain command of the rebels in the absence of my sister and myself."

She pauses for a moment, and we all feel the loss of Lexa's sister Anne after she saved us and sacrificed her own life to do it. I swallow heavily.

Lexa continues, "It is far better we operate through you. They will not expect you to return as they would me."

Nathanial nods. But I know he will bring it up next chance he gets. He always does.

Lexa rises to her feet and stirs up the fire. "Do the rebels know if there are any other child armies or somewhere they are being prepared?"

"They believe there are masses of children are in the forbidden zone," Nathanial answers quietly. "However, this is based purely on rumour."

That gives Lexa pause. "The forbidden zone?" she clarifies.

Nathanial nods.

"Darkmor has had the forbidden zone sealed for as long as humans have been in captivity. Why would he open it now?" She asks.

I pick up my cup, and only the smallest of dribbles remain. "Maybe it is the way out?" I say as I drain the last few drops from my cup. Everyone stops and looks at me. "What?" I ask. "If it was opened when he brought our people here and closed until he intended to go back to the surface, maybe it is the way out."

Lexa sinks down to the floor and sits with her back against the wall. "Could it really be that simple?"

"Nah," says Melissa as she returns to sharpening her dagger. "The forbidden zone is filled with untameable monsters and unpredictable

landscapes. It is simply not habitable by any sort of society or creature that can't make the next living thing it encounters a meal."

"Have you seen it?" I ask.

Melissa pauses, her whetstone halfway down her dagger and says, "No."

"Then how do you know?" I press leaning forward and placing my cup back on the table.

Melissa rolls her eyes. "Because I was—."

"Told?" I cut in.

Melissa frowns and resumes her sharpening and says slowly, "Yes."

I look at the group. "Has anyone been in the forbidden zone?"

The group shakes their head and Lexa puts her hands in her hair. "All the maps show that it leads to the coast, but if no one has been there..."

"It could be a lie," I say simply. "It could be the way up. If only Darkmor and his closest minions know the truth, they could say whatever they like."

Lexa comes over to look at the map and gestures to the section of the map marked 'Forbidden Zone'. "This whole thing could be completely fabricated."

"What about the monsters?" Melissa asks.

I smile. "I am sure they are real. I am also certain if this is really the way out of Shadowsoul, that Darkmor put them there."

Lexa looks up at Nathaniel. "Have the rebels see if anyone has ever attempted to enter the forbidden zone. I would like to know all details anyone has from real-life experience."

Nathaniel nods and leaves the small hut. Melissa gets up and follows him through the door and into the dim light of the cavern.

Tash fidgets for a moment before she rises from her chair. "I should go with them. Nathaniel is very angry, and Melissa will only egg him on."

Lexa nods still studying the map. "That is wise. He places great value on your attention and council." Tash's cheeks turn a brilliant shade of red and she hurries from the mud hut.

I watch her leave. "When do you think they will finally admit their feelings?"

Lexa's eyes flick up and lock on mine. "Sometimes putting your heart out for someone to see can be painful. There is also the added danger of

our quest. The odds of survival are not in our favour. Perhaps they have decided the risk is too high.”

I let my eyes move back to the table and swallow before venturing, “Everything has risk. Caring gives us a reason to keep going. It gives us the hope of a happier future, perhaps the risk of pain is worth the trade for happiness, even if it is brief.”

I move my eyes back to Lexa to find her staring thoughtfully at me, she clears her throat, “Claire—.”

Melissa barges through the door a flurry of wild black hair. “Miss Q is here. She has something huge in her wagon.”

“Miss Q is here?” I ask dumbfounded.

Melissa nods and rushes back out the door. I stare after her and slowly rise to my feet, “Well then, I guess we better go before we are summoned.”

Lexa chuckles. “Yes, Miss Q does have a way with ordering about us underling humans.”

Together we walk out the mud hut and step out into the tiny village the traveling band have created under Nathaniel's firm guidance. Over the last month he had, after much negotiation with Edward, convinced the band they should leave the chasm they had taken shelter in. Slowly, the rebelling band of travellers had moved to a new location, built little mud houses to house them and a wall to help conceal and protect the camp.

They had set up on a small hill in the middle of a balooga forest, which seems to be rapidly spreading with the new light that is pouring in through the hole in the cavern roof. Too bad it took a terrifying flaming rock falling from the sky so bring some light to this dismal place.

I look up at the hole in the distance and see clouds floating by through the hole in the cavern roof. That had become our clock, and my body is thriving on the clear night/day schedule the suns from the world above provide.

We wander through the small street and pass the trainees wielding their heavy staves. Once people can fight with staves, Nathaniel allows them to progress to begin learning with a sword. It has been a slow process. Lexa and I had been drafted to be the leader of too many training exercises. I am almost looking forward to leaving here, so I don't have to undergo any more forced workouts.

My eyes land on a wooden wagon being dragged along by a tangera, holding the reins is Miss Q and beside her, sit Jamie and Jarmile. I find myself grinning at their arrival, I never expected to see them again and it is good to see them looking so well.

Jamie spots us and waves excitedly, I raise my arm and wave back as she tugs on her mother's sleeve. Suddenly she stops as her eyes land on someone in the crowd. She jumps about in excitement and flings herself from the wagon right into Melissa's arms. I can hear their joyful laughter from here.

Miss Q drives the wagon right up to us and pulls the tangera to a halt. The Tangera looks at me with its big brown eyes, it blinks slowly and nudges its head gently to my chest. Startled, I clasp its face as I recall the last time I had seen this happen.

I lean back and look into the tangera's big brown eyes. "Bruce. Is that you?"

Miss Q climbs down from the wagon. "Yes, it is, and he wasn't easy to find either." She says as she pets the creature fondly. "You would think a two-ton beast dragging around a wagon would be easy to find. But it took me almost a week and a half to locate him."

Jarmile comes up to me with a small smile and begins to unhitch Bruce from the wagon. Otis the traveling bands strong man comes up and gives her a smile. "I will show you where you can house him. I will help you get some water and grain ready."

Jarmile sends him a warm smile and together they lead Bruce away.

"Claire, you are staring. And your mouth is open." Miss Q states.

I snap my mouth shut with a click. "Sorry. It is just I haven't been able to get Otis to say more than three words to me. I even learned his name from someone else."

Miss Q shakes her head. "You humans have the strangest concerns."

Lexa chooses this moment to return from her circle of the wagon. "I don't know which is more amazing, that you found it, or that you managed to drag it here."

Confused I duck around the side of the cart to get a look, leaving Lexa and Miss Q to their conversation. Hanging out of the back of the cart are two long poles lashed tightly to the wagon, they tilt on an angle from the wagon to the ground dragging behind it and affectively extending the length of the vehicle to cater for the massively long load.

On top of the poles is a cylindrical metal machine, and from the sides sits two triangular shaped wings running almost the entire length of it. This looks very much like the thing that attacked us when we first met Miss Q. It is not as sleek as I recall it. One of the wings is bent at an odd angle and the whole thing looks like Nathaniel attacked it with a mace after learning about the Eleezas.

A small panel above the left wing draws my eyes and from the bolts around it, the panel looks sealed in place, but if we could pry it open a person could easily fit in the gap. I walk back to Lexa and Miss Q to find Edward has joined the conversation and is animatedly waving his hands about. Miss Q is well out of arms reach and eyeing him with distaste.

As I approach, I hear Lexa diplomatically say, “Now that we are done with introductions and Edward’s fascinating recount of the time he was covered in feathers, I must ask, Miss Q, are you here to trade this machine with us?”

Miss Q nods and rubs her clawed hands together. “This time, you will find that my price is non-negotiable.”

Edward smiles and bounces on the balls of his feet. “Name it and we shall do our best,” he chants.

“Recovering this item and bringing it to you was very dangerous. We believe we have covered our tracks sufficiently, but I have missed many of my required checkpoints to bring this to you.”

Nathaniel who up until now was doing a terrible job of pretending not to listen butts in, “No need to go on about how hard this was, we already know your price will be steep.”

Miss Q growls and Lexa shoots him a glare. Nathaniel closes his mouth and steps back without another word.

Miss Q shakes herself down as if to dismiss his insolence. “As I was saying. I have missed many check points and now I have a bounty on my head. Of course, it is not as impressive as Claire’s,” she says bowing in my direction. “But being with me is no longer safe. My price is that you take Jamie and Jarmile in, protect them and treat them like your own.”

That shocks the group into a long silence. Nathaniel looks incredibly awkward and even slightly embarrassed. Edward looks back and forth between our stunned faces and Miss Q’s expectant one. He rubs his hands on his pants and announces, “Of course! I will see to it that they are given

accommodations right away. They may be sharing at first, but we will begin construction on a dwelling for them tomorrow.”

Miss Q looks at him in a calculating way before saying quietly, “Thank you.”

Edward nods, “Should we prepare accommodations for you as well?”

“I am a wanted fugitive,” Miss Q states flatly. “I am a danger to everyone here.”

Edward shrugs. “Everyone needs a home. Most of us are wanted by the emperor’s army in one way or another.”

A long moment passes before Miss Q brushes her face with her clawed hand. I swear she wipes away a tear in the casual movement before she finally says, “I would like that.”

“Excellent, I will see to it now.” Without a further word, Edward turns and bounds off.

“He is, unusual.” Miss Q remarks.

I smile. “He is a lot at first, but he really grows on you.”

“I can see why,” Miss Q says sincerely.

Lexa is looking around and asks, “Has anyone seen Tash and Lucas? I want them to take a look at this machine and see if–.”

A loud bang erupts from the contraption beside us, and Lexa takes hold of my waist, together we and Miss Q leap for the wagon and crawl under it. Smoke fills the space around us, and I cough at the slightly familiar acid smell of it.

“See, I told you we could get in with explosives,” comes Lucas’s voice from above us.

“I can see that,” comes Tash’s irritated voice. “But what if we want to close the door again?”

“It still works,” Lucas’s voice announces. A loud metallic twisting sound of metal being ripped apart meets my ears and a metal rectangle hits the ground beside the wagon. “Uhh, I’m sure it can be fixed,” Lucas’s voice says uncertainly.

Lexa rubs the bridge of her nose and lets out a small sigh. I smile and nudge her. “I think I found Tash and Lucas.”

Miss Q is hurriedly brushing down her fur, attempting to stop it from standing on end. “You lot will be the death of me.” She mutters as she pulls herself out from under the wagon. “I’m getting too old for this crap.”

I peer out from under the cart, and everything seems to be returning to normal. Twisting in the dirt I turn back to look at Lexa who is rubbing her temples.

“We should go back out there,” I say indicating to the movement around the cart.

Lexa shakes her head. “I would rather stay here for another few minutes.”

I nod and linger unsure. “Do you want to be alone?”

Lexa looks up and takes my hand gently, butterflies erupt in my stomach and my arm feels as if it is alive with a thousand feelings. “Claire, I always want your company.”

Melissa’s head pops under the wagon. “There you are! Well, are you coming? Lucas has been blowing up stuff again.”

Lexa sighs and looks at me again with her brilliant green eyes. “I just never seem to get it uncontested.” She turns back to the still waiting Melissa. “Yes, we are coming.”

We crawl out from under the cart to find Tash with her backside hanging out of the machine. Lucas pops his head over the wing and looks down at us. “We think we can make it work again, it seems to be powered by a crystal and its empty. Aside from it, the only mechanical problem seems to be the wing.”

“And the door!” Tash calls from inside the contraption.

Lucas clears his throat. “A minor problem, I’m sure we will be able to get it fixed.”

Lexa nods and sets her jaw as banging comes from inside the machine and Tash begins to wriggle about as she uses one of her tools to hit something inside it. I watch as the proud woman fights to remain natural with the sound, but I can already see a headache is forming.

Seeing her struggle, I call up to Lucas, “You two should get out of there while we get it off the cart. Miss Q will wear our ears for a necklace if we break it.”

Tash removes herself from the machine and jumps down. “We will organise a group to get it down.” She grabs Melissa’s arm and tugs her in the direction of a mass of interested people huddled nearby.

As they walk away, I hear Melissa say, “How did Miss Q get it up there anyway?”

Smiling I glance back up at the machine to find Lucas in the same position Tash was only minutes ago. I sigh and shake my head. That can be someone else's problem.

Gently I take Lexa's hand and lead her back to our groups mud hut. Once we are inside, the din outside is almost completely replaced with silence. Lexa sighs in relief and sits down on the chair by the fire rubbing her head. I have learned Lexa suffers from these headaches when the situation has been stressful for too long. Unfortunately, that seems to be our whole lives right now and she gets these headaches frequently.

Rummaging through my bag I find my old shirt, little more than a rag now and soak it in some water from the bowl on the bench. Satisfied that it is wet, I ring it out the rag and fill a cup before taking them both to Lexa. She doesn't see me approach as she sits on a chair by the fire with her head in her hands and I take the opportunity to lay the damp cloth across her neck. She lets out a small sigh and I am sure I see her shoulders relax just a little. She looks up and I hand her the cup.

"Thank you, Claire."

I smile as I sit on the small hearth beside her. The little lizard in me revelling in the warmth. Stretching my legs out in front of me I say quietly trying to not make Lexa's headache any worse, "I think Edward will be here soon."

Lexa nods and sips at her water. "I am sure he will."

We return to comfortable silence. Edward has been trying to catch us for weeks with what I'm sure must be a lengthy and well-rehearsed history of Keepers and Xineophs, but it has been hard to find time with the building of the settlement where all three of us are available.

We had specially set aside time today before the evening meal to discuss further. I'm just not sure Edward will remember with everything going on. We wait for a long while and I doze with my head rested against Lexa's knee as I bask in the warmth of the fire. Lexa's fingers lace through my hair as she absent-mindedly plays with it.

I am almost asleep when Edward bursts through the door jolting me into full alertness. "Sorry Ladies, I lost track of time!"

I rub my face. "'s okay," I mumble.

Lexa looks around. "Did you get Lucas?"

"Ah." Edward looks mildly disappointed and says, "he said he wanted to get a better look at the machine outside before Tash forbids him from

touching it. He said you would fill him in.”

“I cannot say I blame him,” Lexa adds. “It has been a long time since he had the opportunity to apply his skill set.”

Edward nods, pulls up a chair by the fire and rubs his hands together dramatically. “I have been thinking long and hard about this Xineoph crash course of yours and I think I have it narrowed down to the essentials.”

I cross my legs and lean forward as Edward clears his throat. “So, to put it simply, there are six gems created by Taliah the Great.”

“We know this.” Lexa interjects. “We read Lord Finley’s journal.”

Edward claps his hands. “Oh, Excellent! So, you know that Taliah’s heir is the one who connects the gems completely with the Xineoph, allowing them to develop full use of its magic?”

I shake my head. “Nope, we missed that bit.”

“The journal pages we had access to were incomplete,” Lexa adds.

“How do we know who Taliah’s heir is?” I ask.

Lexa rubs her fingertips along her temples. “Also, I was under the impression she mated with Chloe. How can there be an heir?”

Edward looks astounded. “Taliah and Chloe were gifted a child by the Phoenix who joined their blood to make a child and placed it inside Chloe.” He looks between our blank faces and adds, “You can ask anyone, this is one of the most well-known stories about the Phoenix bestowing a gift on a mortal or mortals in this case.”

“So, if Taliah has an heir how do we find them?” I ask.

Edward slaps his hands on his thighs. “Ladies, it is one of you. There is no way Claire would have been able to use her magic to keep herself alive after that landslide if her magic had not been fully activated.”

I wince as a flash of tumbling rocks fills my vision and intense pain runs through my lower body. Taking a deep breath, I force the image away and try to refocus on the conversation.

“How does the heir connect the magic to the Xineoph?” Lexa asks.

“Have you ever used your magic together?” Edward inquires.

Lexa glances at me. “Numerous times.”

“Well, that is how it happens.”

I pick at a small hole forming in my pants at the knee. “So, if one of us is related to Taliah are the other Xineophs part of a lineage of some sort?”

“Possibly. It is tricky,” Edward admits. “One gem went to Taliah’s heir and the others went to King Kent’s five children.”

“That doesn’t sound tricky. It sounds like we just need to trace this line.” I remark.

Edward shakes his head. “It is not that simple. Two of King Kents children died before they had children themselves. Since then, two of the gems have been bouncing around, selecting Xineophs at random.”

Silence descends and I glance at Lexa who is thoughtfully staring into the fire. After a long moment Lexa asks, “Is there a record of what colored gems these two children received? Or what color Tahlia’s child had?”

“Carissa is working through the records we have now to see what she can find. But I know a faster way to find Taliah’s heir if you are interested.” Edward remarks with a grin. “Have either of you used your magic with Lucas yet?”

Chapter two

Edward enters the mud hut carrying a pot of tea, followed by Lucas who traipses in after him with smudges of black grease all over his face, hands, and clothes. “What was so urgent that I had to come now?” Lucas whines. “Tash will never let me back in that machine now.”

Edward chuckles. “I don’t think it was me coming to collect you that made her put her foot down.”

Lucas waves his hand. “It was only a small explosive, and it did get us into the fuel tank.”

Lexa turns pale. “You used an explosive on the fuel tank? What if it was combustible?”

“Tash and I had a difference of opinion. I was very sure there was a crystal in there and her way would have taken a very long time.”

Lexa lets out a sigh. “I am assuming you were correct as you are still alive?”

“Of course, I was.” Lucas replies as he plops down beside me. “Now that we are done discussing my brilliance, why was I summoned?”

I take the teacup Edward hands me and say, “We need to use magic with you to see which of us is Taliah’s descendent. Apparently, it is also how full activation of the magic in the gems is achieved.”

Edward passes a cup to Lexa and adds, “It would be good to get a recording of your power combinations and independent usage as well.”

“We have not been able to use the necklaces independently.” Lexa remarks and sips her tea.

“Nonsense, Claire used hers to—,” Edward seems to notice my discomfort and continues, “Well, Claire has used hers and there had probably been many times you have used yours without realizing,” Edward says cheerfully as he settles into a chair with his own cup of tea.

Lucas looks like he is about to fling himself from the chair with excitement. “Yes! Let’s do it now, who wants to try it with me first?” Lucas notices my hesitation and looks excitedly at the woman behind me. “Lexa?”

Lexa sits for a moment before she withdraws her necklace from her pocket and loops it around her neck. “I think it is best we do it in here

away from inquiring eyes.”

Lucas nods eagerly and stands up holding his hand out for Lexa to take. She moves towards him and grasps his hand, there is a brief flicker of green and violet light, then nothing.

Lexa lets out a small sigh and drops his hand. “Claire?”

I pull my necklace from my pocket and twirl it in my fingers, the sapphire gem glinting in the firelight. I haven’t worn this since Edward said it was safe to take it off, I swallow down my reluctance and rise to take Lucas’s hand.

Blue and purple light erupt through the room in a fantastic array of shades, Lucas’s eyes twinkle in wonder as he takes in the sight around us. The first blue line opens on my arm as something begins to rise through the hard packed dirt between me and Lucas. I stare at the rising stem in fascination as Lucas slaps his hand to a wound that opens under his slave brand and violet light pours through his fingers.

A plant works its way higher, sprouting jagged leaves as we watch. A flower bud emerges from the stem and rapidly grows before it bursts open revealing vibrant blue petals and a deep red centre. It is like nothing I have ever seen before. Another flower bud opens below it and with it a new line across my stomach. I let go of Lucas’s hand breathing hard and I sit down on the floor.

Lucas mimics my position, and he shoots me a smile. “Claire, we did it.”

Edward walks around us, inspecting our magical wounds and then finally the plant between us. “What an unusual flower.”

Lexa hands me my tea and I take it gratefully. I eye the flower trying to recall why it feels so familiar.

“That isn’t just any flower.” Lucas remarks, crawling towards it and inspecting the petals with gentle fingers. “It is a Nilkar plant. These are only supposed to grow on the surface.” Lucas looks at me with wild excited eyes. “This is what your healing paste is made out of.”

I nod and Lexa slips her arm around my waist and another eruption of light bursts out. All four of us are engulfed in our protective bubble and blue lines burst out of my forearms.

Lexa jumps and starts to remove her arm, but I grab hold of her. “No, it is better to get this over with.”

I hold my hand out to Lucas who takes it. Violet joins the green and blue dancing light and little purple tentacles appear on the outside of the bubble. I watch as one of the wriggling violet appendages takes hold of a cup from the table and waves about with it in its grasp. The bubble of dancing light around us flashes green and Lexa raises her hand to her neck with a wince. Little blades of green begin to appear underneath us and rapidly fill the floor space inside the dancing light.

Lucas reaches down and runs his fingers through the lush blades beneath us and even as another wound opens and pours violet light through the back of his hand he grins from ear to ear. I cannot help but share a small smile at his excitement. If only I could find a way to feel that happy about my abilities. I grimace as a prickle of pain travels between my shoulders and the burning there tells me another wound has opened.

“Okay, enough,” I say dropping Lucas’s hand and feeling a pang of loss as Lexa withdraws her arm.

The bubble around us disappears and the cup falls to the ground with a clatter. I release a sigh of relief as the wooden cup bounces but doesn’t break. Cups are not easy to make. I slump as a headache thrums in my head and exhaustion makes itself known.

Lexa quickly takes off her necklace and slips behind me, her arms wrap around my waist as I rest back into her chest with a small sigh.

Lucas is vibrating with excitement as he picks one of the green blades and twirls it in his fingers. “It’s grass.” He looks up at us still grinning. “I think I grow things, also, that tentacle thing. I have no idea what it is, but its super cool.”

I lower my fingers and allow them to travel through the growth below me, green blades travelling between my fingers to tickle my palm. The lush plant is soft and spongy under my hand. My eyes travel to the flower standing tall in the middle of the grass, its beautiful petals a stark contrast to the various browns and greys of the room.

I smile and say, “It is beautiful Lucas.”

Edward is over by the table the cup from the floor in his hand. He turns it to reveal a deep burn in the wood where the tentacle had been holding it. He inspects it closely muttering, “Fascinating.” He turns to us and announces, “It would seem that Claire is Taliah’s heir.”

Carissa bursts into the room clutching a fragile looking scroll in her fist. “Edward, it is red and—” she pauses in takes in the plant life

throughout the room. “How?”

Edward smiles and gestures towards us. “Our Xineoph’s have been practicing.”

She stares blank faced until her eyes land on the flower in the centre of the room. “Is that a Nilkar?” She asks in astonishment as she tucks away a strand of her greying hair.

“Yes,” Lucas says proudly.

“How long has it been flowering for?” She asks, urgency lacing her voice.

Edward shrugs. “About ten minutes?”

Carissa nods and strides towards the plant, pulls out her knife and makes quickly work of removing the flowers and leaves from the stem.

Lucas moves towards her and watches the process with interest. “What are you doing?”

She carefully lays the leaves and petals on the grass at her feet. “Nilkar’s only flower for a day before the petals start to wilt. But the sooner the flowers are harvested the more potent the medical properties are.”

“How do you know this? This is a surface plant.” Lexa enquires, her voice traveling from behind me.

Carissa looks at her, her tanned face a mask of stone. Edward comes over and lays a hand on her shoulder. “They have trusted you with their secret.”

Running her fingers through the grass, Carissa says, “I was born on the surface. I have only been in Shadowsoul for nine summers.”

Lexa is quick to pounce. “How did you get here? Why didn’t you tell us when we told you we were looking for a way to the surface?”

Edward holds up his hand to prevent further questioning. “Carissa does not remember. All she knows is she was harvesting foods on the surface for a meal and then woke up here.” He rubs Carissa’s shoulder gently with one hand. “It is very likely she was a snatching victim gone wrong.”

“Snatching victim?” I ask.

Edward picks up what is left of a probably cold cup of tea and sits on the grass. “There are some creatures with the ability to teleport between Shadowsoul and the surface. Sometimes they are employed to collect things from the surface, we use them from time to time to procure certain

items. Most of them have a code that prevents them from moving living items.”

“Some do not.” Carissa adds. “A lot of money can be made in the slave trade. Most of the goblins here want humans for various reasons. Our best guess is that was the intention for me, but something must have gone wrong.”

“Can these snatchers you work with be persuaded to take humans to the surface?” Lexa asks from behind me.

Edward shakes his head. “The ones who hold the rules as standard are inflexible on the topic. The ones who are not, are not the individuals you should ask for assistance.”

Carissa collects the plant from the floor and rises to her feet. “I will go process this into paste before it is too late.”

She is almost at the door when Edward asks. “Carissa, what did you come here to tell us?”

Carissa looks at him for a moment before clicking. She does an awkward repositioning of items in her grasp and wriggles the fragile scroll she had been holding when she entered from her pouch. “The gems without blood lines,” she says handing Edward the scroll. “They are red and green.”

With that, she leaves the hut, and the room descends into silence. Edward takes a sip of his cold tea and grimaces. He waits a moment and does it again with the exact same response.

I smile, “Would you like a fresh one?”

Edward waves his hand and takes one last huge gulp and shudders. “There are times when one must test the level of their endurance.”

“By drinking cold tea?” Lexa says dryly. I smile and I can tell by the tone of her voice she has one eyebrow raised.

Edward nods his head sagely. “There are many different kinds of endurance Lexa.”

Lucas touches a violet wound that has opened on his forearm and hisses. “These things really hurt.”

“What does it feel like when you touch it?” I ask.

Lucas and Edward look at me like I might be a little sadistic and Lexa comes to my rescue. “When I touch Claire’s it burns, and when I touch mine it is like a sharp jolt of electricity. This happens for both of us.”

Lucas nods and touches his wound again and hisses once more. "It is like a sharp pinch."

Lexa leans forward, her hand out and Lucas offers her his arm. I feel Lexa's sharp intake of breath as she withdraws her hand quickly.

"Yes." She nods. "Pinched is an accurate way to describe it."

Edward is scribbling all of this down on a piece of paper he has retrieved from his pocket and peering at us like we are the most fascinating things he has ever written about. I can see his hand moving across the paper at high speed, almost desperate in its attempt to record what he has witnessed today.

I close my eyes and rest, the aches across my body burn uncomfortably. Lexa shuffles behind me and murmurs, "Go to sleep Claire, you need it."

"What about your headache?" I ask as I consider if I should push Lexa to rest.

"It feels much better now, I think you fixed it."

I nod and say, "I am glad you feel better." I readjust so my back is against her chest and my head is tucked under her neck. The comfort of her hold and the soft spongy grass make the position incredibly soothing and sleep quickly overcomes me.

I grumble as something tickles my nose. I try to push it away, but the feeling keeps coming back. Opening my eyes, I peer through blades of green and smile unable to resist the temptation to run my hands through it. I tentatively move my shoulders and find I feel much better, the wound on the back of my hand has only the tiniest sliver of blue light coming from it. I let out a small sigh and sit up to find the room full of activity. Lexa is studying a map at the table and Tash is giving Lucas and Melissa some instructions before they leave the hut.

"What is going on?" I ask rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

Lexa turns and gives me a brilliant smile I cannot help but return. "We are preparing to leave tomorrow morning. Given the rebel activity we have decided it is best to get moving before everything gets out of hand."

I nod and climb to my feet. I leave Lexa to study the map and head over to Tash who is slowly packing our bags with supplies in preparation for our departure tomorrow morning.

"Need any help?" I ask.

Tash shakes her head and gives me a smile. "I'm almost done. If you want, though, you can go grab our food pouches. Edward said they should be ready for collection."

I nod and head out the door and follow the roughly hewn path up to Edward's caravan and dodge a band of children chasing a leather ball. Edward is one of the few people who insisted on continuing to live in his caravan and passed up the larger space a mud hut would have provided. It is probably for the best. He would just accumulate more things to fill the larger space with. I pull my jacket tighter around me in an attempt to fight off the cold cavern air and knock on the peeling red door.

It flings open, and I am greeted with a face full of long wiry red hair as Edward lunches into a hug. "Claire!" he chirps. "It is so great to see you."

I pat his back awkwardly. "Edward, we saw each other just after lunch, remember? It has only been a few hours."

Edward shrugs and beckons me inside. "You never know which meeting will be your last." He sings, for a moment his eyes fill with sadness, but he perks up almost immediately. "So, I try to make each meeting the best I can. Also, I like hugs."

I feel a stab of sadness for Edward. For such a friendly man he is not very forthcoming with his past, I have asked around, but no one seems to know what Edward did or who he was before creating this band of misfits. I cannot help but feel his extreme happiness and positivity now makes up for a lack in his past.

I smile at him. "Every meeting with you is always a pleasure."

I am rewarded with a full toothed grin, and Edward moves about his small caravan with a prance in his step. "Tea?" he calls over his shoulder.

I glance at the stacked sacks of food in the corner and back at Edward. "Sure."

The energetic man buzzes about the room and comes back with a teapot and two cups, all of them are from a different set. He puts the mismatched pile down and pours tea into a pink and a blue cup. I don't know how he does it, but Edward always seems to have a hot tea pot on hand and ready.

I take the blue cup with a smile and sip the tea, the minty flavour is soothing. "How have you been since lunch Edward?"

“Excellent,” he answers in a hurry and fidgets with his hands. His demeanor suddenly anxious and sorrowful now that we are alone in his caravan.

I frown. “Edward, are you okay?”

He twitches. “No,” he finally breathes. “I think I have had another vision.”

I almost drop my cup. “But you no longer have the necklace,” I splutter.

“I know,” he says in a quiet voice. “I don’t know how it happened. Perhaps I held the gem for too many years, and it has affected my body?”

I grit my teeth and think of Edwards seizures, we had all hoped with the removal of the necklace they would stop. My eyes notice for the first time the bruising on the side of Edward's head by his ear and the scratches on his left arm.

I begin to rise. “I will fetch Carissa.”

“No.” Edward pleads, grabbing at my sleeve. “What I have seen is only for you and Lexa to know.”

I frown and slowly lower myself back to the cushion on the floor. “If I listen and promise not to tell anyone except Lexa about the vision, you will let me tell Carissa about your fit?”

Edward's face does an odd sort of grimace. “Yes,” he sighs in a defeated tone. “She will make me take that awful tonic again though.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Awful tonics are better than seizures.”

Edward absently rubs his arm. “I suppose you are right.”

I wave at Edward. “Hurry and tell me about this vision, so we can have someone look at you and make sure you aren’t more hurt than you are letting on.”

Edward puts his cup down and feigns insult. I hold up my finger. “I have seen it for myself. Don’t deny it.”

He gives me a small smile. “It is not worth bringing minor injuries to the attention of others.”

I give him a face. “The last time you said that you were being scolded over not telling us you had been in a fight with a nurat, who had torn a hand length gash onto your back. You needed thirty-two stitches.”

Edward waves his hand. “There is no way to tell a story about how I got squished by a giant rat and sound like a hero.”

I roll my eyes and wonder if his seizure had once again opened the wound. He needs to see Carissa. I hold the redhead's gaze. "Okay no more dancing around the topic, tell me about your vision."

Edward takes a big sip out of his red teacup and places it down beside his grey teapot. He takes a deep breath and rushes out, "InmyvisionIsawdeath."

"Pardon?" I ask trying to pull apart the words he had mashed together in his hurry to get them out.

"Death. I saw death," He confirms in a much slower voice, twisting the fabric of his purple shirt.

"Whose death?"

Edward gets up and paces. "Everyone's." He shakes his sleeve and turns to me. "In my vision, we were in a wasteland. Everything was destroyed, and a fire burned through everything in its path. Dust filled the skies and blotted out the suns, making everything as dark as Shadowsoul." He pauses. "Bodies were everywhere and in the centre of it all was a huge hole that had punched through Katera's crust and annihilated Shadowsoul."

I gape at him. "Another falling rock?"

He nods. "Except this one must have been a lot bigger than the one that has already hit us."

I bite my lip thoughtfully. "Have you ever had visions about the future before?"

He shakes his head. "Normally I see things as they happen or shortly after." His pacing increases in speed and he runs his hands on his thighs. "It is also the first one I have had since I gave the necklace to Lucas."

I put my blue cup down. "If this dream is a prediction, it doesn't matter how this war pans out."

"That's the thing," Edward says and sits down heavily, "I am not 100% sure it was a vision. Normally in my visions, I take the view of someone else. In this instance, I was me. There was also this strange silver glow around the edges of my sight, which has never happened before. My family possess no magic, so how without the gem could I have had such a vision?"

I ponder the question. "Is it possible it was a hallucination?"

Edward shrugs. "Until now, my seizures have always been caused by the necklace. Everything from here on out is new territory."

We sit quietly, but Edward seems to be greatly cheered by the idea that his vision could have been a hallucination brought on by his seizure.

I drain my cup and rise to my feet. "We need someone who understands more about the effects of seizures more than we do."

"Have you ever met someone else who has seizures, Claire?" Edward asks quietly. "Because I haven't."

I stop at the door. "Edward, even if you are the only person in the world to have these seizures, you are not alone." I give him a smile.

Edward sends me a full toothed grin. "I am blessed to have a friend such as you, Claire."

His quiet honesty surprises me. "That's weird," I say. "I feel the same way about you."

Edward lets out a bark of laughter at my delivery and climbs to his feet. "I will go see Carissa now."

"Promise?" I enquire.

"Promise," he parrots back and leads me out of the caravan.

I watch him head towards Carissa. They exchange a few words, and suddenly Carissa is beginning a full inspection of Edward's arm and has already sent two small boys off to collect something. Judging from the look on Edward's face, it is the tonic he so dislikes.

I head back to the small hut where Lexa and the others are. I open the door and Tash looks at me expectantly. "Did you leave the sacks outside?"

"Sacks?" I repeat dumbly. Suddenly I recall why I had gone to see Edward and my cheeks burn red with embarrassment. "Damn it."

Tash chuckles. "You had one job, Claire."

I look down in shame. "My bad."

Tash waves her hand. "It is okay, I will go get them."

"I will walk with you," Lucas says, jamming his glasses back on his face. "It's my turn to help clear up after preparing the evening meal and Edward's caravan is on the way."

Together the two of them leave the room, and suddenly I realise I am alone with Lexa. She stands studying the map, the firelight illuminating her olive skin and dark hair.

I push away the rush of nerves, and something else I won't look too closely at, and plonk in the chair beside her. "Lexa, Edward thinks he has had another vision."

Lexa turns to me in surprise. "Tell me."

She listens as I share with her Edward's vision and our concerns. When I finish, she sits quietly processing the new information in the careful way she considers everything.

"Unfortunately, we cannot forget it," Lexa finally concludes. "While it is likely given the differences that this was a hallucination, there still remains the potential for it to be a real vision."

I nod. "Edward is really frightened by it, and he doesn't want anyone but us to know."

Lexa bites her lip and I find I am oddly fixated on the movement. "This could be important information."

"Right now, all we know for sure is that our friend had an extremely unpleasant experience and has asked us not to tell others," I say. "If it becomes apparent that this is more than that, we will address it then."

Green eyes bore into mine, and Lexa lets out a long slow breath. "You are right. It is a sound plan."

I smile at her praise, and she smiles back. We share a long moment of intense eye contact that forces me to swallow and redirect my stare to the map as the flickering light of the fire casts dancing shadows across it.

Lexa takes in a deep breath. "I have been thinking we give Edward one of the sets of crystals we have uncovered."

I look up from the map. "The white ones that transmit messages?"

"Yes, the ones we found in Arnita's belongs and the ones we found with the remains of the mated couple." Lexa replies.

I nod. "I think Melissa still has the set we found from the guards the Jiggler's killed."

Lexa raises an eyebrow. "She had failed to mention that when we did an assessment of our possessions to see what we needed to prepare for the journey to come."

I shrug. "Maybe she lost them, a lot has happened since then, and they are small."

We sit in silence for a moment as Lexa stares into the fire. I fidget with an empty cup on the table. "How will we get the gems to talk? I thought they were all connected to Darkmor somehow. We wouldn't want to accidentally contact him."

Lexa nods. "There is a woman here, a gifted that could potentially unlink the connection our sets have with Darkmor's forces and link them to our own."

“It would be handy to be able to communicate with Edward. You know, without needing to come back here once we complete our task at Mount Wolner,” I say eyeing the huge peak on the map and the images of monsters drawn around it.

“Yes,” Lexa confirms. “Time may prove critical with this uprising and the threat of these enormous falling rocks.”

“Can we trust the gifted lady you mentioned to keep our secret?” I ask.

Lexa clenches her jaw and stares into the fire. “Yes,” she says after a long pause. “It is Carissa.”

That catches me off guard. “Carissa? How do you know?”

The woman beside me shrugs. “I have developed a sense for it over the years, and my crystal makes me more sensitive to it. It has taken me a while to realise what it is, but I am finding I can sense people who have used magic.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You can sense them?”

“Only if they are nearby and I have only felt it a few times,” Lexa confides as she rolls up the map.

“Who have you felt it near?” I enquire.

Lexa carefully places the map into her backpack and says, “Edward, Miss Q, you, and Carissa.”

We are interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Lexa who looks at the door in surprise and I turn towards the wooden door. So far everyone has just let themselves in as they pleased. Who would knock?

I get up and open the door, on the other side stands Carissa and a wave of chills run over me. It is like our words summoned her or something.

The older woman looks up at me and readjusts her overall straps. “I wanted to say thank you for making Edward come see me. His latest seizure has pulled open some of his stitches and banged him up a bit.” She pauses. “But I think he will be okay.”

“Thank you for letting me know,” I say.

She pauses awkwardly for a long moment. “Did Edward say anything weird to you?”

I glance at Lexa as she approaches the door. “Not really,” I lie.

Carissa nods. “He informed me today that life is short and that we should have dinner together.” Her cheeks redden. “I just wanted to make

sure he meant it, and that it was not some sort of weird after seizure comment.” Her face has become fully scarlet now, and her short brown hair frames it nicely.

I think back to Edwards confession about his vision. “No, I think he means it.”

Carissa beams at me before composing herself and clearing her throat. “I mean, it is just a meal between friends.”

I nod and give her a wink. “Sure, it is.”

Lexa seems to be sizing Carissa up. “Are you gifted?”

I turn and stare at Lexa. I knew she would ask Carissa, but I didn’t expect her to just come out with it. Usually, Lexa is more delicate with these kinds of situations.

“Pardon?” Carissa asks in a hurry and seems flustered by the question.

Lexa raises an eyebrow. “Are you gifted?” she repeats. After a long silence, Lexa adds. “You are aware of our mission and that Edwards has given a member of our group his necklace, yes?”

Carissa casts a quick look about and darts past us into the room. I share a look with Lexa and slowly close the door. I can’t deny that her direct approach is effective, but it could have been softened a little.

“I am aware of it, yes. But I don’t see what that has to do with your question.” Carissa responds and gives us a weary look.

Lexa goes to her bag and pulls out two sets of crystals and places them on the table. The small translucent crystals let out a soft glow that rises and falls in a way that reminds me of breathing. “These are communication crystals. They were Darkmor’s, and now I want them for us.”

Carissa picks up one of the crystals, and her eyes flash with white light. The moment is so brief, I cannot be sure what happened before she quickly puts it back on the table. “Breaking the connection is easy,” she says, indicating at the glowing rocks. “Linking them together is not. Not all crystals are compatible, and it depends on whether these ones like one another.”

“The crystals have feelings?” I ask staring at the white crystals on the table.

Carissa almost rolls her eyes. “Everything that lives has feelings.”

My eyes dart to the table. “The crystals are living?”

“How else do you think they can send messages, and create light? Edwards necklace even chose Lucas. Does it sound like a dead thing could do that?” She remarks, picking up another crystal and inspecting it closely.

I touch the necklace hidden in my pocket and feel a twinge of guilt for leaving it there for so long.

“Can you try to link them for us?” Lexa asks, and I notice her hand has drifted to her hidden pocket as well.

“I can try,” Carissa says. “One of these sets are very talkative, but the other is not. Let me take them and see what I can do. When do you need it done by?”

Lexa casts me a glance and returns her eyes to Clarissa. “Tomorrow,” she says.

Clarissa looks up at us, a hint of annoyance in her face. “You didn’t leave me much time.”

Lexa remains silent and waits. This time Clarissa does roll her eyes. “I will see what I can do,” she replies as she scoops up the crystals and heads for the door, closing it with her foot behind her.

Lexa and I are left standing in the centre of the room. Lexa moves towards the fire and remarks, “She is interesting to converse with.”

I pull my necklace out of my pocket and twirl it in my fingers. “Do you really think our crystals have feelings?” The gemstone twinkles brightly at my words.

“I believe we should take that as an affirmative from the source itself,” Lexa says withdrawing her own crystal.

“Maybe we can ask them not to activate when you and I touch?” I suggest.

Lexa raises her eyebrow. “I cannot see the harm in trying.”

I focus intently on my crystal. I feel a little silly, but I give it a go anyway. “Please don’t use magic when I touch Lexa, it sort-of hurts, and it would be nice if your magic only worked when we needed it to, instead of all the time.”

I turn to Lexa. “Are you ready?”

She nods and slowly, we link hands. For a moment, nothing happens, and I smile. Then a massive burst of energy flows through me and vibrant green and blue bubble of light appear around us, making the fire roaring in the hearth look like a candle in comparison. We stand inside the bubble for a minute before the first magic wound appears my hand. I hiss with pain

and quickly let go of Lexa as she raises it to cover a wound that has appeared on the side of her neck.

I inspect my magical wound as sapphire light pours from it. “I don’t think it worked.”

Nathanial re-enters the room with Melissa in tow. “The rebels will do their best to gather information on the forbidden zone,” he grunts and steps aside to let Tash and Lucas back into the room carrying sacks of food.

They stop to look at us. “What happened?” Tash asks, her eyes taking in our wounds before darting around the room for the threat that had caused us to use our magic.

“Aww,” says Lucas. “You guys were practicing without me?”

“We were trying to see if there is a way to stop our gemstones working on contact,” Lexa says with a small huff. I nod and tuck my necklace back in my pocket.

“Did it work?” Lucas asks.

Melissa smacks the back of his head and gestures at the blue and green wounds on our bodies. “Does it look like it worked Lucas?”

Behind them, a small herd of children barge through the door and bring in a basket of rolls and a small hot pot of stew carried between two struggling children.

I leap to the door and take the hot pot from them at once. “Who allowed you to carry this?”

The young boy puffs out his chest and sweeps his black hair from his eyes. “Carissa said, ‘I should ask Otis the strong man to help me, but I’m strong enough to carry it with Herman’s help,” he says, indicating to the young blonde boy standing next to him.

Herman’s face is scrunched up, clearly prepared for the incoming scold.

“You two should not have been carrying this,” I say sternly, the dark-haired boy opens his mouth, and I hold up a finger to silence him. “You may be strong enough to carry this, but it is burning hot. What would you have done if this had of spilt on either one of you?”

The boys shuffle from foot to foot. I look at them sternly. “You both could have been badly injured and affected for life.” They nod, and I rein in my temper. “Thank you for bringing us our dinner, but never carry something like this again without an adult to watch you.”

They murmur, “You’re welcome.” And scurry from the room.

Lexa takes the pot from me and carefully attaches it from the chain hanging over the fire, the flames lick the base of the pot and the liquid inside bubbles. She returns to my side and quietly encourages me to sit on a chair by the hearth.

“You are very protective of them,” Is all she says before she leaves me to calm in silence.

Tash serves out the stew and places the bowls on the table, we all make our way to the table and sit. I eye the lumps of green yanma, previous experience with the vegetable had shown me I have a great dislike for it.

Still, I had never had them in stew before. I scoop up a lump and bite down. The revolting flavour rolls over my tongue, and the vegetable sits in my mouth like a slimy piece of leather. I fight my instinct to retch, and I swallow the thing whole, shuddering as it goes down.

Lexa chuckles quietly and moves her bowl to mine and begins scooping the yanma from my stew into hers, replacing it with a few potatoes.

I smile at her. “Thank you.”

I resume my meal with much more enthusiasm now that the dreaded vegetable is no longer lurking within my dinner.

I am finishing the last of my bowl when Nathaniel suddenly looks up at Lucas with suspicion. “Why are you here? Aren’t you supposed to be helping in the kitchen?”

Lucas has a brilliant smile. “I am free of kitchen duty!” he chirps happily.

“Why?” Nathaniel grunts, his face very much like a child who believes they have been unfairly treated.

“They said because we leave so early tomorrow, I can have the night off.” Lucas beams.

Nathaniel’s face darkens and Lexa cuts in. “In light of that, I am going to retire for the night. I have asked watch to wake us at first light so we can get a good start towards Mt Wolner. I fear we have delayed enough as it is, we still have three other necklaces to locate. It would be beneficial for our cause if we could achieve that before the full-scale rebellion takes place.”

Nathanial grudgingly lets the subject of Lucas's sudden release from kitchen duty go.

I take the dishes to the door and carefully rinse all the bowls with some water from my canteen. With balooga trees everywhere, water hasn't been a problem for some time now. I stack them inside the pot and head towards the kitchens, but Otis intercepts me a few steps from the door and takes the burden from my hands with a small bow.

"Thank you," I say.

The giant man nods. I have known Otis for almost two months now, and I haven't been able to get him to say more than three words in a single encounter. I am left standing alone in the fading light of the cavern and I take a few moments to admire the sky through the hole in the cavern roof. Small lights twinkle and bring a deep sense of calm. When the sky looks like this it always reminds me of my necklace.

I take it out of my pocket and look at the blue gem. I swallow and push past how weird it is to talk to a necklace and say, "I am sorry you spend so much time in my pocket. It is just that I cannot be sure Lexa and I will not make contact and accidentally use magic if I keep wearing you."

The necklace gives off a small blue flash and I let out a sigh and slip it back into my pocket. The tension in my shoulders and across my brow pushes itself to the front of my mind. I close my eyes and take in a deep breath, filling my lungs with as much air as they can take before I slowly exhale. Mother had taught me this, some kind of ancient breathing practice. I have always found it helpful.

Rolling my shoulders, I head back inside to find everyone shuffling the furniture to the edges of the room and rolling out their blankets. It is much warmer in the little mud house than it is in the cavern, and having four walls to keep out most of the unwanted creatures is a soothing thought.

I move over to the fire and curl up into my blanket laying on the thick grass, it tickles the side of my face, but it is much better than the dirt packed floor. I bring the blanket up under my chin and watch the glowing embers until I fall asleep.

Chapter Three

Lexa gently shakes my shoulder, her cool hand brushing my neck. A rush of tingling spreads from her fingertips and across my body. I roll to face her with a small sigh and mumble, “Morning.”

“Good morning, Claire,” she replies with a smile and returns to folding her blanket neatly. “It is time to get moving.”

I sit up and rub my eyes. I bundle my blanket around me and watch the rest of the group who are in varying stages of waking. Only Lucas, curled up beneath the table holding his blanket in a tight grip remains asleep.

Melissa lays on her stomach and casually flicks small stones at his face until he wakes with a whine and rubs his face, “Why so early?”

Melissa snatches the blanket from him and begins stuffing it into a bag. “Because we have a world to save Lucas.”

He crawls out from under the table. “Why can’t the world need saving at a decent hour?”

A small smile crawls onto my face. If this journey has taught me anything, it is that Lucas hates early mornings.

I roll my blanket and stuff it in the bag beside Lexa's neatly folded one and pull my necklace from its hidden pocket in my pants. The blue gem twinkles in my fingers and quickly I return it to my pocket reassured it is there and well. Since our capture with the goblins, Lexa has added a secret pocket to her clothes to conceal her emerald gemstone.

Wearing them is too risky, every time Lexa and I make contact while the gems touch our skin a burst of magic pours out of us. It takes a massive toll on our bodies, leaving painful wounds in our skin where the magic streams out.

There was also the time the goblins stole Lexa’s necklace, and I would rather make it more difficult for future attackers to take our most prized possessions from us. As much as Lexa and I had tried to persuade Lucas to keep his necklace hidden, he absolutely refused to not wear it, insisting that the gem chose him, and he would not abandon it. I understand his sentiments, but these magical gems are too precious to lose. They are our only hope against Darkmor’s magic.

We all head outside and Edward, in a majestic purple robe, is there to greet us, his eyes land on our packed bags, and he gives us a knowing smile.

He turns to Carissa, beside him and says, "See, I told you if we did not stand here, they would leave without breakfast."

Lexa gestures to the bags that hang from our knapsacks. "You have already been so generous with our supplies of food that we did not wish to impose on your hospitality any further."

Edward bounces on his feet. "It is the food you helped to collect, the hospitality you helped to build, and our world you are planning to save." Edward remarks. "I think we can spare breakfast."

My stomach rumbles loudly at Edward's remark, and Lexa gives me a glance. Edward is quick to pounce. "The rumbling tummy has spoken!" he declares.

Lexa smiles and shakes her head. "That was an unfair fight, you know Claire is always hungry."

"That I do," Edward announces happily. "In war, you must play every good card you have."

Carissa gestures to the cooking fire in the distance. "We took the liberty of preparing breakfast early so your travels will be less delayed."

Eagerly Melissa, and I lead the way over to the cooking fire, excited to find bread, cooked meat, and an array of vegetables.

I smile at Melissa as we pile our plates. "Careful Melissa, or you might take my place as the hungry one."

"Says you, standing there with two full plates," Melissa says, indicating at my hands.

My face heats up. "They aren't both mine."

Melissa glances up at Lexa still in conversation with Edward and Carissa. Carissa hands Lexa a small bag and Lexa carefully tucks it into her knapsack. Melissa's eyes dart back to mine, she winks at me, puts a slice of bread in her mouth and grins around it as she walks away.

I take a plate over to Lexa, and we hurry through a delightful breakfast. I finish cramming in the last of my vegetables and basically roll towards my bag. I couldn't jam more food in my stomach even if I wanted to. We all amble to our feet and check to make sure we have everything.

Clarissa approaches the group and gives us a small smile. "We have finally come up with a name for our little village. We have called it,

Traveller's Haven."

Lucas pushes his glasses up his nose and leans in. "It's got a nice ring to it."

I smile. "It is about time. It doesn't make sense to keep calling you the traveling band."

"Is that what you were calling us?" Edward chimes in. "How odd, our name was, Minustarvas."

I stare at Edward, unsure if he is serious or pulling my leg. A few moments pass and I cast Lexa a glance.

She clears her throat and says, "Aptly named, I am sure."

Edward sends her a beaming smile and pulls us all into a surprise hug. We slowly detach ourselves from Edward and once more check our belongings, ensuring we haven't left anything behind.

"Well, I think we are ready," I announce.

"All right, impending departure," yells Edward with his hands cupped around his mouth. People doing early morning chores pause for a moment, send us a wave, and return to their tasks.

"Edward we're all right here there is no need to shout." Carissa scolds, wiping her hands on her blue overalls.

"Carissa, some things just need to be shouted," Edward says. "Like a departure, danger, and the word bubbles."

"Bubbles?" Carissa repeats back to the man, who nods enthusiastically at her. Carissa opens her mouth to reply but then pauses, shakes her head and walks away waving to us as she leaves. "Good luck," she calls. "May the Phoenix be with you."

Edward approaches Lucas, "Alright my Xineoph, you look after that beautiful necklace of yours. If I hear you have mistreated her," Edward threatens, pointing his finger at Lucas.

Lucas holds up his hands. "I swear I will treat her with honour."

Both men smile and clap hands in some sort of patterned handshake.

"There is one thing you can be sure of when Edward is around," Lexa whispers sending a smile my way. "There is never a dull moment."

I give her a full toothed grin. "That is for sure."

We all receive a tight hug from Edward, and we wave goodbye, I look longingly at our little mud hut, I am going to miss it and the small community we have been a part of.

We head away from the settlement and make our way towards the dark peak in the distance. The cavern is much brighter during the day. Thanks to the new hole in the roof, I can see the dark mound in the distance that marks our destination. The insanely high mountain with the flat top. I shake my head, how does something form naturally like that? Its like someone just went and cut the peak off with a large knife.

Our group walks through the small balooga forest in high spirits, being well-rested and full of food does wonders for group moral. It takes a few hours to work our way out of the flourishing balooga forest. We pass a few of the new inhabitants of Traveller's Haven, who wave their hands at us before returning to their tasks. Everyone is at ease here, over the last few weeks we had all spent a large amount of time planting and foraging in this area.

It is a long while before we enter a part of the forest that isn't frequented by its new inhabitants. This part of the forest is quiet, almost tranquil. I wish I had of ventured this far while we were resting here. The light that comes through the trees is dim compared to a fire, but bright compared to the darkness before the large sky rock made a hole in the roof of Shadowsoul.

As terrifying as the initial experience had been, I cannot help but feel that the destruction the rock caused has turned out to be beneficial all these weeks later. It is hard to tell what the caverns will look like in a few seasons, but if the sudden burst of life we have seen so far is anything to go by, I have a feeling it could be wonderful. I smile losing myself in thought as I walk quietly behind Lexa.

I am unsure how much time has passed, but the suns have moved out of sight and can no longer been seen through the sky hole when the trees begin to thin. The group drifts closer together, and the good nature of the trip fades as we look out over the barren desert that awaits us. We hesitate when it comes time to leave the cover of the trees, and we hover in the final line of trunks. Only a few small balooga saplings dare to grow outside the firm boundary created by the larger, older plants. We have made good time clearing the small forest. I glance back out over the barren plain. I doubt the next part of our trip will be so pleasant.

Lexa takes in our anxious faces. "Perhaps we should rest under cover of the trees before we continue out."

Everyone nods in agreement, and soon we are sitting by a tiny fire, enjoying warmed drinks with herbs. I peer out through the trees and watch the ominous mountain we are heading towards.

Even from here, it looks like a place I should avoid. I can't say I am looking forward to actually being near enough to touch it.

"Are you okay?" Lexa asks nudging me with her elbow.

I start and turn to face her. "Yeah, I think I got used to comfort and security."

Lexa nods. "It was nice." She squeezes my forearm. "We will have it again one day, that's what we are fighting for."

I nod and try not to stay overly focused on the word *we*. I lick my lips and say, "I suppose it gives me something to look forward to."

"There is talk of large meat-eating creatures scattered throughout this place," Nathaniel states ending our struggle at cheerful conversation. "Some say the creatures are bigger than two men in height and have been known to tear people in half as easily as we would rip off a chunk of bread."

Melissa sits with her elbows around her knees as she pokes the fire with a stick. "I have heard similar as well," she says. "All I have to add is that these creatures are very fast and that you don't know they are there until they are trying to eat you."

Nathaniel finishes off the last of his hot drink and adds, "I'm not sure how accurate the claims are, but if they are fact, these creatures are something we want to avoid."

Lucas chimes in. "A place this big wouldn't have much food to sustain a creature as large as what you are implying. Unless they are cannibals as well."

"That would explain how they manage to sustain themselves in a place as apparently devoid of life as this," Lexa remarks.

"Well let's hope they are busy enough eating each other to leave us alone," Melissa says dryly.

Lucas nods. "My guess would be if they do exist and are eating each other to survive they won't be sleeping out in the open. I imagine they would live in the ground, a burrow of sorts."

"Okay," I say. "So, avoid big holes in the ground unless you want to be lunch."

“Given what I have been told about the creatures in this place,” Nathaniel says shoving his cup back into his bag. “You are likely to be more of a snack.”

Tash shakes her head. “Why can’t we just visit a place that isn’t riddled with monsters for a change?”

We all nod in agreement. My stomach grumbles loud enough to be clearly audible to those around me.

“Perhaps we should eat?” suggest Melissa. “It has been hours since our last meal and I too have come accustomed to having three a day.”

Nathaniel grunts, “We should try to preserve the food far as long as we can. Ration it so we delay needing to find out own food for as long as possible.”

“Both are excellent ideas,” comes a voice from behind me. “Fortunately, I have a solution that caters to both.”

I twist around to find Miss Q standing behind us holding a basket and wearing a backpack. “Miss Q?” I say dumbly, still processing the fact that she is suddenly here.

“In the flesh little kit,” she remarks with a sharp toothed grin. She moves to the middle of the haphazard circle we are sitting in and begins to unpack food from her backpack and basket.

My stomach rumbles again at the sight of the cold meat, vegetables and bread Miss Q is unpacking. She hands Lexa a rolled-up package and says, “Otis said the dried meat was not yet ready yesterday to be travelled with, but it is today.” Lexa’s eyebrows furrow and she slowly takes the package and it in her knapsack.

Miss Q pulls out another wrapped package and unfolds it carefully, revealing seven small cakes and my stomach almost flips in excitement.

Miss Q sits back and looks at us expectedly. “Well, eat.”

We all dig in, even Nathaniel who had suggested holding off and rationing our food for as long as possible. Miss Q uses our fire to make herself a cup of tea and sits back with a small cake in her furry hand. Her dark eyes dart from each member of our group as she eats.

“Will you be traveling with us Miss Q?” Lucas asks before he takes a massive bite of a sandwich he had created and filled with just about everything on offer.

Miss Q shakes her head. “Unfortunately not, Edward has asked me if I can do some things for Travellers Haven and after his kindness I cannot

turn down his request. I also feel strangely compelled to help the humans in that camp.”

“You could be helpful to us,” Nathaniel grumbles wiping away the crumbs that had gathered on his shirt. “If we were to run into guards, having a quelton with us would go a long way towards explaining why we are seemingly roaming free.

Miss Q sighs and adds, “There are also some places that I cannot go. Due to an ancient magical pact, I cannot physically cross into the sands around Mount Wolner.”

“What pact?” Melissa asks leaning forward to snag a cake.

Miss Q stares at her in silence. The silence extends so long that I shift uncomfortably and Melissa fidgets with the cake in her hand.

Lexa comes to our rescue. “Thank you for bringing this food to us Miss Q. Your generosity with your time has granted us an extension of comfort we did not believe we would have.”

Miss Q turns to Lexa with a grin and says, “As always, your manners are impeccable.” She rises to her feet and collects the basket and backpack. “I must be off if I am to tend to Edwards requests in a timely manner. Good luck on your journey.”

With that, she disappears into the trees in a blur.

“It was nice she brought us lunch,” says Tash as she collects what is left of the food and carefully tucks it away in her backpack for latter. “It was a little random though.”

Lexa is still staring into the trees where Miss Q had disappeared and remarks, “I have always found encounters with Miss Q have an odd sense of clarity when viewed in hindsight.”

Nathaniel crosses his arms. “I am glad she is gone. Her self-established sense of superiority is infuriating.”

“Yes,” says Melissa eyeing Nathaniel. “Thank the Phoenix that a self-established sense of superiority is not something we must deal with every day.”

Nathaniel narrows his eyes at her.

Lucas oblivious to the tension beside him drains the last of his tea. He shakes his small wooden cup, casting out the leftover dribbles and stuffs it back in his bag. “I am off to use heed natures call before privacy is a thing of the past.”

There is a great scuffle as everyone hastens to follow Lucas's suggestion.

I look back towards the mountain and the endless stretches of dirt before it. As far as I can tell, nothing lives there. Maybe a large rock could provide privacy, but there doesn't even seem to be many of those.

I pull myself to my feet, having relieved myself not long ago, I have no reason to follow their scurry, and I am left to defend the bags and put out our small fire.

I head out of the line of trees to the desolate sand beyond and scoop up handfuls of dirt, it is so dry it runs through my fingers. I take it back to our small camp and dump it on the fire to smother it, it takes three trips, but at last, I am satisfied the fire is out.

I punch a hole in the trunk of a fat balooga tree with my knife and water pours from the wound. Steadily, I refill all the water canteens and wash my hands before pressing a piece of bark over the hole to cover it. Slowly the tree stops leaking water as the bark sticks over the gash like a dressing.

I sling my backpack over my shoulders and place my hand on the hilt of my sword, gripping it for reassurance as I look out over the dead landscape at the high mountain in the distance. My stomach knots and an almost overwhelming sense of terror fills me. I definitely don't want to go there.

I recall the beauty of Ethira and shrug. I suppose at least Mount Wolner looks like some place you should avoid instead of being disguised in mysterious glowing fungus that would be beautiful if only it didn't scream in a completely incapacitating way and harbour terrifying monsters to boot.

My companions begin to reappear and collect their belongings, if anyone is as bothered as me about our destination, they are not showing it. I try to shrug off my sense of unease, maybe I am just overthinking it.

Finally, we are all ready and Lexa walks to the front of our little group and is first to break the line of trees as she purposely sets out towards the mountain, her footsteps leaving deep imprints in the loose dirt. We march over the dry landscape, and I realise it is not as lifeless as I had first assumed.

Small, spiked bushes grow in clusters along the dry and depressing plains. In amongst these groups of tough plant life is a community of little

animals. Lizards, beetles and even some small sort of fuzzy animal with a very long snout all live within the spiky plant's shelter. They scatter as we approach and gingerly poke their faces out of their burrows to watch us pass.

The fact that this place isn't as hostile as I had first thought gives me hope. Hope that the looming sense of doom I am feeling is just related to leaving the comfort and security I had become used to in our temporary home.

Lucas spins in a half circle to look back at us. "Who wants to play eye spy?"

Melissa groans and throws her head up towards the cavern roof in a gesture that screams 'why me' in everything but words.

"What is eye spy?" I ask.

Lucas looks thrilled and opens his mouth when Melissa cuts him off. "It is a game designed to drive everyone around you insane."

"It is not," Lucas splutters. "It is an ancient game that has been played for generations."

Lexa slows down to walk beside me as Melissa and Lucas launch into a debate as to the original intentions of the game. Lucas insists it is for entertainment and Melissa is adamant that it is a crude torture tactic.

Lexa smiles. "It is a game where one finds something within the landscape and gives the first letter of it to the group. The group then takes turns guessing what the letter stands for using the things within the landscape and the letter given as clues." Lexa grips the straps of her knapsack and readjusts it on her back before continuing, "The person who answers correctly is deemed the winner and is expected to offer a letter for the next round."

I look around at the bleak landscape. "There doesn't look like there is much to play this game with."

Lexa nods. "Hence Melissa's stance on the game being responsible for insanity and torture."

The group walks in relative silence, only Lucas and Melissa finding the energy to debate the intentions of the game as we all struggle through the sand.

We trudge for hours and the loose dirt tugs at my boots and slowly works its way inside them, I am considering the benefits of stopping to

empty them when we stumble upon a road. Well, when I say road, I mean deep tracks in the ground where wagons have obviously passed many times and packed the loose dirt into something more manageable to walk on. We all pile onto the road and continue towards the looming peak in the distance. My legs are heavy from wading through ankle deep sand for hours on end and this road is a welcome relief.

Tash drifts back to where Lexa and I walk and says, "I have been thinking about the machine and if the engineers left at Travellers Haven are able to charge the crystal, I think it can be modified to support the rebels."

"Do you know how to control it?" I ask, curious to learn more about the device.

Tash shakes her head. "I have some theories, but nothing can be tested without turning it on."

"Turning it on before we know how to work it may give Darkmor a weapon right in the middle of Travellers Haven," Lexa remarks, running her hands through her hair.

Tash nods. "I have been thinking, what if we use a block crystal? It should prevent an outside signal from connecting with the machine when we turn it on, and it will give the engineers there a chance to get it working."

Lexa considers Tash for a long moment. "It is a brilliant idea. Have you thought how we might acquire a blocking crystal?"

Tash shakes her head and smiles. "I just come up with the ideas, it is someone else's job to find the bits I need to make it work."

"If I was to arrange a meeting between you and the engineers back at Travellers Haven, could you coordinate with them and set them down the path of exploring these ideas?"

"Yes," Tash says slowly. "But we won't see them until after this mission is over, unless you intend to send me back?"

Lexa waves her hand. "Of course not. You are much too valuable here to send you back." Tash lets out a small sigh of relief before Lexa continues. "We have been able to turn some of the communication crystals we acquired to our advantage. We will use those to set up the meeting as we travel."

The grin on Tash's face is positively illuminating. "I would like that."

“Excellent. I will contact Edward next time we stop and set everything in motion,” Lexa concludes.

Tash waves her hands about in excitement. “I will go talk with Lucas. He is often reckless with his impulses, but he does have some ideas that are worth considering.”

Lexa nods. “Whatever you think is best. You have full control going forward with this task.”

Tash doesn’t require any more encouragement and races up ahead towards Lucas.

“I think that made her very happy,” I say as I walk around a particularly huge and very dry dung pile in the middle of the road.

Lexa nods. “It would seem so. Tash has a brilliant mind but lacks the confidence to be assertive, a trait drilled into her by her enslavement no doubt. My hope is that this task helps her to realise the value she has to offer and bring about a higher level of self-confidence.”

Lexa gracefully weaves around some piles of dung, and I watch her thoughtfully. It is amazing how someone can be such a good leader. She just has this way of bringing out the best in the people around her. My thoughts are distracted by a huge mess up ahead as a section of the road widens, which I guess could be a campsite or a place where individuals stop to rest. We approach it hesitantly, but it seems to be deserted.

The sand in my boots has reached a level where it can no longer be ignored. It is almost as if there is currently more sand in my boot than there is foot. I lean against a large wooden post buried firmly in the ground. Countless metal loops have been hammered into the wood and remnants of fibres linger in the joins of the roughly worked metal. I take off my boot and tip out a steady stream of yellow, orange sand. I put my unbooted foot down, careful to avoid the nearby animal dung crawling with flying insects. A lizard sits perched at the edge capitalising on the beetles drawn to the scent of the manure. I tug my boot back on and start to empty the other one, which somehow seems to have even more sand than the first.

“I guess guards frequent this spot quite often,” Melissa says dryly.

I look at the scattered piles of trash and old gnawed bones. I am inclined to agree with her. Humans who want to remain hidden don’t make this kind of a mess.

“Yeah, but why would guards come out here?” Tash asks gesturing at the dead, flat plains. “I doubt there is much of value out here, and long-term survival would be difficult in these dry conditions.”

“You’d be surprised, about some of the things guards are made do.” remarks Nathaniel but offers nothing more.

A small wooden crate stuffed into a cluster of waist high brambles catches my attention, and I wander over to peep through the gaps. Empty jars stand in rows and are held sturdy by some form of white fluffy material.

Why would someone leave this here? Even empty those jars are valuable. Glass is not the type of commodity you see often. As I move away, something catches my eye, I inspect the jars closer, pulling one out and holding it to my face.

No, these aren’t empty. I swirl the vial, and a thick liquid goes to great lengths to seemingly camouflage with its surrounding. Still, there is a definite silvery tinge to it.

“Hey,” I say over my shoulder. “Come look at this.”

Lucas is first by my side and grabs another bottle from the crate, swirling it as I had. “This is remarkable. Look at the way it changes colour and consistency.”

He grabs hold of the stopper and is about to remove it when Melissa takes it off him and puts it carefully back in the crate. “You don’t know what this is for, or who left it. They could come back for it at any minute, and I would prefer not to give them notice we were here.”

Lexa looks over the trashed makeshift campsite. “We should not stay here. This is asking to get caught.”

Lucas wonders over to a pile of blackened kindling and kicks it with his boot, a cloud of smoke rises from it, and some small embers scatter from under it.

He turns to us with a pale face. “Uhhh.”

Lexa stares at the still-hot fireplace and her body tenses, and she looks at the group. “Move now!”

I stuff my boot back on and shove the vial into my backpack, hastily I place the lid back on the wooden crate. I glance around at the vast empty landscape, which makes it easy to see approaching enemies. Unfortunately, it also makes it easy for potential enemies to see us.

I feel like I can see a small mass in the distance. Was that there before? Or is it my frightened mind playing tricks on me?

We all hurry, and Lexa takes us on a winding route off the road and back through the soft, sandy dirt. I stop and stare at our obvious footprints, there is no point running if we are going to leave a blazing trail like that for the guards to follow.

“Lexa,” I call out.

She turns, and I point to our trail. Lexa considers it for half a heartbeat before pointing at a tattered old blanket just off the road from the place we are fleeing.

Tash leaps forward, grabs the blanket and begins to pile sand on to it. Lexa runs back and helps her, both quickly shoving sand onto the fraying material. I stand and watch them, confused. How is sand on a blanket supposed to help us now?

They fold the blanket in half, and Lucas comes to grab a corner, together him and Tash tug the filled blanket over the footprints and the heavy blanket it buries them, leaving a strange, patterned shape in their place.

It still leaves clear marks on the ground, but it less obvious the campsite was visited by humans.

We struggle through the sand, taking turns to rotate who drags the heavy sand filled blanket but it is slow going. We continue for a short while until we climb atop a small sandy hill and stare down at a large gaping hole in the dirt. A burst of foul air erupts from the pit and has my hair streaming back from my face.

I fight back a gag as we stumble back from the hole, but the smell of stale water and rotten meat lingers in the air around us. Lucas’s words about creatures living underground in these plains jump to the front of my mind. This burrow is giant, Nathaniel could walk in there and not need to stoop or bend his shoulders.

Lexa stops us all with a raise of her hand, and without a single word, we quietly hurry back the way we came. We come across a hard packed area filled with large flat rocks not far from the burrow, a huge pile of brambles is on the other side. Lexa steps onto the flat rocks and leaves small tracks that are much harder to see.

She looks at Tash and Lucas. “Dump the sand off to the side and hide the blanket.”

Tash dumps the sand in a pile, rolls the tattered blanket up in a wad and stuffs it in her backpack as Lexa has us diverge along the track. We leap across some smooth windswept rocks, and reach the massive pile of brambles, like the ones we had seen earlier, only enormous. The wicked spikes are easily as long as a thumbnail.

“1328,” Shouts a gruff voice. “The tracks head this way.”

My heart flies into my throat, and in the distance, I can see a group of scarlet guards, their red armour vivid against the deadened wasteland. It is a big group, and we are very outnumbered. Hopefully the giant brambles give us enough cover that they haven’t noticed us immediately.

Lexa takes out her sword, drops to her knees and begins hacking at the lowest brambles attempting to make a small hole. Nathaniel gently pushes her to the side and replaces her, he makes quick work of the brambles. He bullies his way through the wickedly barbed branches, and we all hurry after him. Even with his attempts at widening the gap, I am covered with deep scratches by the time we make it to the centre.

In the centre of the brambles is a spindly trunk and the branches dome out around it as each of them desperately reaches for more of the pitiful light within the cavern. Around the trunk is easily enough space for us to sit. It is incredible to think this whole thing is just one bush, I was sure it would be many.

We sit quietly nursing our wounds as the sound of many feet approach. They are so noisy. How do they expect to hear anything but the sound they make?

“Halt!” bellows a commanding voice.

I pull my knees up to my chest as if I can somehow make myself smaller and less noticeable, than I am now.

Through the tiny gaps in the brambles, I can see flashes of red. A heavily armoured group stops beside our hiding place, their metal plates clunking noisily with the slightest movement.

“I hate this place.” Says a gruff voice.

“I know,” replies another. “First, we lose a dozen men on the path to that crazy witch, then we lose the last of our beasts to one of those sand monsters and have to lug those damn vials around ourselves.”

“I cannot believe the commander made us spend all morning looking for the beast,” Another voice grunts.

“Don’t forget now we are following unfamiliar tracks in a place where everything tries to kill you.”

“At least this is only your first trip here.” Chimes in a younger male voice. “I get picked every month for this damn trip. I swear my commander is trying to get me killed since I banged up his daughter.”

“You are the reason Commander Meltin’s daughter, Annabel, is waddling about with that huge belly of hers?” the gruff voice replies his voice tilted with amusement.

“If she has a boy, I will have to be welcomed into the family,” the young male voice boasts. “That would drastically increase my social standing, and I would be mated to a woman that’s not half bad to look at. Who would want more?”

I share a glance with Lexa, who has her lips pressed firmly in a line of disapproval.

“Not if her father finds a way to make you dead first, Jemton.” The men laugh heartily at this until silence suddenly descends.

“Why have we halted?” demands a deep, slow voice.

“1328,” says another young voice. “We are approaching the Vermalian lair, are you sure these tracks are not just prey it has dragged this way?”

There is a loud crack, followed by a whimper. “Don’t question me “9817,” says a deep voice.

Unable to sit and listen any longer I crawl back towards the tunnel and push my way through the brambles, crawling on my belly, so the sharp barbs don’t catch my skin and shirt and pull at the bush. I don’t want to give a single reason for the guards to look this way.

Unfortunately, the loose branches Lexa and Nathaniel had cut away drag against my stomach and thighs. I painfully wriggle to the entrance and hang back in the shadows. Peering at the cluster of guards as they head towards the place where the large hole is.

A snot-coloured goblin human hybrid with huge and unnecessarily flamboyant shoulder pads stands ahead of the army of men and goblins and marches them forward with his sword raised. They are heading towards the hole we had turned to avoid—my stomach clenches. I’m not an expert, but I am pretty sure nothing good lives inside that hole.

The first few guards arrive at the mouth of the hole and suddenly out of the dirt bursts a huge thick animal its many short legs wriggling about

in a fury. The animal has two huge yellow eyes on either side of its head, and its giant barbed pincers click together in agitation as the beast shakes dirt free from its body.

The guards stagger back, a few manage to draw their weapons or hurl spears that bounce off the creature's tough hide with a metallic clang. A few spears manage to make a solid purchase in the joins between the enormous beast's sectioned body. The creature lets out an ear-splitting wail and begins to pursue the guards who had dared to attack it. It ignores the wooden spears protruding from its body as it drags itself from the hole. It emerges, revealing many legs and a wickedly barbed tail that curls high above the body behind it. Something black and shiny drips from the tip of the bulbous tail head and slides off the beast's scales. The huge droplet rolls harmlessly down the scales and drips to the ground where it hisses upon contact with the sand.

"Don't just stand there you idiots!" Yells the hybrid commander and points his heavily muscled arm at the beast. "Attack!"

The beast turns upon the commander and snatches him up with massive pincers and delivers him into a large heavily toothed mouth. The hybrid screams as splatters of green blood erupt from just below his middle where the pincers grip him tightly and splash onto the sand.

The small army of guards attack the Vermalian and come at its giant insect legs with the swords and axes hacking vigorously. They actually manage to chop through one of the front forelegs, the leg falls to the ground with a thump and thick spurts of dark yellow liquid stream from the still attached stump. As it sprays the nearby men with it, an awful burning smell fills the air, and the guards scream in agony covering their faces as they stumble about blindly.

The beast lets out an ear-splitting wail that makes me cower a little further into the brambles. The Vermalian's thick tail lashes out at the guards with amazing speed and deadly accuracy, impaling many guards and crushing others underfoot in its maddened pursuit.

A man runs for the cover of our brambles and dives towards the hole we made. He comes face to face with me and stops with surprise. The ground around us shakes as the beast's body awkwardly ambles in our direction as it slowly becomes accustomed to the loss of its leg.

I take one look at the naked terror on the young guard's face and grab his arm and try pulling him further into the protective space. The beast

wails and the sound is unbelievably close, the young man's body gives an awful shudder, and a dribble of blood pours out his mouth. He coughs, splattering me with hot crimson, and he takes a gasping breath that sounds wet and strangled.

He looks me dead in the eye and with shaking hands, pulls a folded square of paper from under his chest armour and shoves it into my hand.

“For Annabel Meltin,” he gasps.

His body shudders again, and he is violently ripped from the brambles. His deep grey eyes look at me with intensity as I scramble back and peer through the now slightly widened gap. The young scarlet guard is flicked around wildly, and the vicious barb of the Vermalian’s terrible tail has pierced him all the way through his middle. The black tip protruding out of a bloodied mass of dislodged meat and bone.

The remaining guards throw down their weapons and thunder past us, one with a huge red welt on his face turns back and asks, “What about 1328?”

One slows down long enough to grab hold of him and jerk him back into movement. “He is dead. That nasty red goblin just got promoted.”

The men disappear over the sandy rise, and slowly the sounds of their pounding footsteps and terrified yelling fade. The beast settles down and slowly, one by one, drags its dead victims back into its hole. Leaving only blood-stained dirt and chaotic tracks to show the carnage that took place there.

I slowly crawl back into the hole, and everyone looks at me as I clasp the bloodied note to my chest and wipe at the blood coating my face.

“Was it as bad as it sounded?” Tash asks.

I swallow down nausea. “Worse.”

I wipe a dribble of blood from my cheek, and we sit in silence. The note sits heavy in my hand, and I swallow heavily as I look down at the battered paper.

Deafening silence fills the space, and I look at Nathaniel. “I am pretty sure those stories you heard about the monsters that live here are true.”

Lexa clears her throat. “Let’s clear away these barbs, and we will rest here for the night.”

Chapter four

We set to work clearing the space inside the brambles and Nathaniel hacks a second exit, so we are not trapped in the event something gets in with us. We push the cut branches out and throw them on top of the bush, packing them around the widened opening that the young scarlet guard had made in the last terrible moments of his life. I touch the note in my pocket and resolutely ignore the large bloodstain near the entrance of our hiding spot. Nathaniel notices my discomfort and discreetly covers the blood over with dirt using the side of his boot. Everyone is silent as if the quiet can somehow encourage the screams of the recent past to be silent too.

We head back in and settle down. Lucas yawns and lays his blanket over the ground to cover the random spikes that remain hidden in the dust.

Melissa rummages through her backpack and takes out one of the blankets we had brought from Miss Q and throws it over Lucas. “Try not to be a blanket hog this time,” she says, forcing a smile onto her face.

“I wouldn’t have to be a blanket hog if you didn’t sleep all spread out like a winged fish on a dinner plate,” Lucas mumbles sleepily as he pulls the blanket up under his chin.

Melissa rolls her eyes and climbs under the blanket. She makes a point of spreading out, taking all the blanket with her. Lucas makes a sad little whine and rolls over into Melissa’s side, using her arm as a pillow and in the process claiming back his share of the blanket.

Everyone else squishes in the small space, using Lucas’s idea to lay a blanket over the ground to protect their bodies from the worst of the hidden barbs. I buddy up with Lexa, and the two of us take first watch. It is cold and dark, but no one dares to suggest a fire. But the idea that Lexa and I can somehow keep ‘watch’ is funny, the best I can do is strain my ears, listening for sounds. After seeing that monster attack and kill so many guards in just a few moments, every sound is ominous. Anything could be lurking out in the dark.

Lexa and I huddle together for warmth, sitting on one blanket with it tucked up over our knees and draping the other over our shoulders. I squint in the dim light and try to pull a stuck barb from my hand. I can’t see it, but I know it’s there.

After a few minutes of making it worse, I give up and leave it. “It is impossible to see anything,” I whisper to Lexa.

She nods. “Hopefully the barbs that made it so hard to get in here will convince predators we are not worth the effort.

“What about the Vermailan?” I ask thinking about the horrifying creature and shaking my head as the young man's terrified face flashes into my vision. Even in the arena, I had not seen a beast as proficient a killer as that. “I’m sure it could burst in here and rip the place about without a second thought.”

I hear Lexa swallow. “I am sure it is well fed for now, and that we are of little interest to it.”

I nod at her rational words, but still, the fear lingers.

“One of the guards saw me,” I say quietly.

Lexa starts and begins to rise. “Why did you not say that earlier Claire!?”

I grab her sleeve and say, “He is dead.”

Slowly she sinks back onto the blanket and gives me a look.

“I tried to help him. He was so scared.” I swallow, and I pull the note out of my backpack. “But the Vermalian killed him, and he gave me this as it dragged him away.”

Lexa takes the note and unfolds it. “I cannot read this; it is too dark.”

“He said it was for Annabel Meltin,” I say.

Lexa's head shoots up. “This was from the guard who boasted about getting that young woman pregnant?”

“I think so. It all happened really quickly, and he only said her name.” I shake my head. “I can’t be sure, but I think so.”

Lexa hands back the note. “When there is enough light, we will read it. If it is not unnecessarily cruel, we can attempt to deliver it to her should our paths cross.”

I carefully tuck the note away and pull the blanket closer around my shoulders. We sit quietly as the night falls completely around us, the occasional scurrying the only sound we hear until a terrifying wail happens in the distance. I guess there is more than one Vermailan present on these damned plains and not all of them are as well fed as the one in the burrow nearby.

I stare intently at the barbed branches, determined to give anything but that terrible wailing my attention. I prod at the little knot of wood in

the branches beside me, the bark is rough, and these tiny knots appear randomly all over the stems and branches. I am just turning my attention back to the spike in my hand when I notice the knots on the branches are beginning to open.

I lean forward and inside them are small flowers with five tiny red petals and as the blossoms unfold little stems rise from the centre of the flower. Each flower has two or three stems each supporting small orange balls that glow brightly. As I watch, more of these flowers slowly open on the branches around us creating a soft orange light enough to illuminate our sleeping companions. I grab Lexa's hand and squeeze it. The return squeeze is enough to assure me that I am not seeing things.

"Do you think it will try to kill us?" I ask as the memory of wailing mushrooms bullies the way to the front of my mind.

Lexa looks around. "I cannot say. However, we are surrounded."

A quick glance around confirms her words. After a few moments of nothing, I reach out and carefully touch the nearest flower bud the orange lights roll off the petals to sit on my fingernail. I hold it out and inspect it, but as far as I can tell, it is just a tiny ball of orange light about the size of a needle head. I wish I had Lucas's skill for identifying plants.

"Is it pollen?" I ask.

Lexa looks around, her eyes green with wonder. "It could be. However, I have never seen or heard of plants reproducing in this way."

A light soft breeze blows through the brambles, rustling the branches and picking up the little orange balls. They tumble around in the air and float together in the soft breeze drifting into the night.

"Let's go see," I whisper and crawl through the exit without waiting for Lexa to reply.

I carefully pull myself from the brambles and crouch by the entrance, waiting for Lexa to appear beside me. A soft breeze blows past, ruffling my hair and sending the orange lights of our little hideout tumbling away with the wind. In the distance, I can see answering patches of orange light as other thickets like our release millions of glowing pollens that tumble around together in the breeze. They fill the cavern around us, lighting the space in a fantastic display of beauty. The little glowing balls dance around each other in the wind and light up the cavern as far as I can see.

Out of the darkness emerges small flying creatures, that swoop and glide amongst the glowing pollen. Hundreds of the animals flutter about in

the orange light, singing a sweet melody that brings a smile to my face. One of the creatures stops by our bramble shelter and perches on a thin branch. The small, feathered creature is about the size of my fist and draped in splashes of bright greens and blues accompanied by a bold yellow chest. The winged animal seems too brilliant to exist in such perpetual darkness. How can anyone admire its colours fully down here?

It looks at us, tilting its head from side to side. The creatures pointed mouth opens, and more of that beautiful song flows into the cavern. Without a second glance, it launches off toward its companions to graze upon the pollen.

“It’s amazing how a world as dark and inhospitable as this could produce something this beautiful,” I say, looking at the floating pollen in awe.

“I think that every day.” Lexa breathes quietly.

I turn to find her facing me, and she hastily averts her eyes to the floating lights. I place my other hand over her knee and Lexa looks at me through her eyelashes, I swallow and reach out to cup the side of her face with my hand. Her skin is soft and warm, and the connection sends waves of tingling down my arm to settle in my lower stomach. Lexa raises a hand to rest over mine, and my heart thunders in my chest as she leans forward.

A loud snore rumbles out from the brambles we both start.

Lexa clears her throat. “We should probably go back inside.”

Disappointment settles heavily in my stomach, and I watch as Lexa crawls back into our makeshift shelter. My eyes linger on the shape of her body as she disappears into the brambles once more.

I take one last look at the floating light display, and I follow her into our meagre shelter. Lexa offers me an open water canteen, and I take it with shaking hands and try to ignore the sensations that flow through me as I drink. We sit in silence with the orange pollen around us diminishing as they blow away in the gentle breeze. Only the pollen caught in the brambles lingers, offering a soft light to our small dark space.

I glance over at Lexa, who sits staring at her hands. I wonder what would happen if we were in a different world where life and death didn’t hang over us like a perilous dagger. We had grown closer over the months we have known each other, and I realise now what I feel for her is very different from what I had come to expect as friendship. But we are on a critical mission that should have no distractions, and I have a sneaking

suspicion engaging with Lexa in that way would be a massive distraction. But what if this mission kills me, or her?

I run my hands through my hair—desire and reason war with themselves within my stomach, throwing nausea into the mix with their tumbling.

Lexa shifts beside me. “Pass me the note. There should be enough light to read it now.”

I retrieve it from my bag and hand it to her. She unfolds the paper and holds it out for me to see.

Dearest Annabel,

I dread that another posting will keep us apart after this one. It pains me to know you are growing our child, and I cannot be there to help you. Your father forbids me from writing to you, but I do every day, and I keep the notes stashed under a loose stone in my bunk. I will give them all to you once I return, so you will know I have no thoughts for anyone who isn't you or our child.

I keep the mating ring with my letters, my commander keeps doing spot checks, and he takes whatever he fancies. That ring means so much to me that I cannot stand to lose it. If only we could have your father's blessing and I could declare us as mated to the world! I wish I didn't have to keep my love for you a secret.

I have been thinking about names for our child.

I think Ameliah would be a wonderful name for a little girl. Oh, I can imagine she will look just like you! All long brown hair and bright blue eyes!

And what do you think of Deavon if we have a little boy?

It is okay if you don't like the names, we still have four months to come up with the perfect one.

I can't wait to be able to hold our little child for the first time.

You have my love forever and always.

Your mate, Jemton

Tears run freely down my face. He loved her. He really loved her. I look at Lexa as I try to come to terms with the words on the page.

“He was so excited to be a father,” I say.

Lexa carefully folds the note. "And they were secretly mated."

I swallow. "He is a complete stranger, and if we had met before the Vermalian, I am sure he would have tried to kill us. But at the same time, I feel a deep sense of pain at his death."

Lexa nods. "His death pains me too."

"Those letters," I say suddenly. "What if she never gets them?"

Lexa hands me back the note and says resolutely. "Then we better make sure she gets this one."

I put the note back in my bag, and my thoughts chase themselves around for what feels like hours before Nathaniel yawns and sits up rubbing his face. I don't know how he does it, but Nathaniel always wakes on time for his turn to watch, I have never had to wake him. Tash opens her eyes and curls up into the blanket, reluctant to admit it is her turn too. Nathaniel squints at the orange balls of light caught in the branches around us and points at them soundlessly.

"The bush released them some time ago, they seem harmless," Lexa says quietly.

Nathaniel inspects one closely. "They're not dangerous?"

I shake my head. "All they have done is glow and float about."

Tash reluctantly sits up, still curled sleepily in her blanket. "It looks pretty."

I smile. "You should have seen it earlier, there were thousands of them floating about in the darkness of the cavern."

Tash lets out a lazy smile. "Sounds romantic."

I blink and immediately busy myself with rearranging the blankets so we can lay down. Lexa and I settle down, and the warmth of her beside me is soothing. I close my eyes and fall asleep.

I awake to find I am curled up into Lexa's side and she has one arm resting protectively around my shoulders and back. I snuggle into her before I start backwards, realising what I am doing. Lexa's arm tightens around me reflexively and draws me back. It doesn't take a lot to convince me to stay, I lay my head back on her shoulder and place my hand lightly on her stomach. I glance around our small shelter, the light from the hole in the cavern roof illuminates the space with a little light. I find Melissa looking at me with a smirk.

I send her a silent glare.

She holds up her hands and turns to Lucas, who is sitting upright with his head drooped to his chest. Taking watch in pairs seems to have been a good idea. Lucas doesn't appear to be able to ever make it through his watch.

The arm around my shoulder tightens, and Lexa mumbles a sleepy, "Good morning."

I squeeze her back and gently pull myself from the embrace and do my best to get my hair into some kind of order. The braids help to keep it from my face, but they do tangle with one another and need constant tending to.

Lucas snores himself awake and looks about wildly. "I wasn't asleep," he claims immediately.

Melissa smacks his arm playfully. "Don't lie."

Lucas looks at the ground. "I didn't mean to fall asleep," he amends.

Melissa pats him on the back. "There's the truth."

Tash yawns, stretching dramatically and Nathaniel sit up as best he can and fidgets. In this cramped space, there isn't enough room for me to stretch out, I can't imagine how he is feeling. Melissa pulls a food bag from her knapsack and hands out the last of the stale bread, we wolf it down, careful not to lose a morsel. Lucas crawls through our back exit and peers around before wriggling back.

"It looks clear," he says in a low voice.

We all escape our confinement and look around anxiously. The barren landscape teeters on the edge of being our friend and our enemy. I can see for miles around us. Unfortunately, this means things from miles around can see us too.

In the distance is a low black band peeking out of the dead sand. Mt Wolner doesn't look any more inviting than the rest of this place. In fact, the dramatic black band makes me feel more uncomfortable than the nearby presence of the Vermillian lair.

Lexa sets her jaw and looks at the mountain. "At least we don't need a map to know where we are going this time," she says.

Lucas fidgets with his backpack. "We don't need a map to know it is full of monsters either."

"It can't be any worse than what we have already experienced," Nathaniel grumbles as he squints down at the distant peaks.

“Don’t say that.” Whines Lucas. “The universe will see that comment as a challenge and send something horrible just to prove you wrong.”

“Well, we won’t know if all we do is stand here and talk about it, let’s get moving,” Tash says as she begins walking towards the distant band.

Lexa rolls her shoulders and sets off. “She is right, there is no point standing here imagining what could be ahead of us.”

“Yay, walking!” Lucas says sarcastically. “Whatever will we do to pass the time between now and when the next monster finds us?”

A smile crawls on to my face. “We could play a game of eye spy?”

Melissa narrows her eyes at me and gestures to the barren landscape around us. “That will be a fun game,” she says dryly.

“I have a question about the necklaces,” Lucas says abruptly.

“We don’t really know much about them, but ask away,” I say.

“Okay, what if the person who has the next necklace doesn’t truly own it, but they are looking after it like Edward was.” He pauses, “What is the word for it again?”

“Keeper,” I supply.

Lucas nods. “Yes. What if the next Keeper isn’t as friendly as Edward?” Lucas asks twisting the hem of his shirt in his hands. “I mean, how many people would willingly give up something that makes them powerful?”

His questions are met with a long moment of silence. I bite my lip and process Lucas's questions. Sure, Edward had happily given his necklace over, but Lucas is right, not everybody will be so accommodating.

“We will try to reason with them,” Lexa answers finally.

“And if that doesn’t work?” Melissa asks.

Lexa pauses and gives us the answer we all knew was coming, “We will do what is necessary to ensure the success of the mission.”

Silence settles once more over our group, and the only noise is our footsteps crunching in the sandy earth. No one broaches the topic of what we are to do if the person we encounter is the true owner of the necklace and refuses to help us.

We walk for a long time across the parched dirt, avoiding the small but viciously barbed bushes and the twisted sickly trees that desperately cling to life in the barren landscape. Twice we have to track back and go in a large circle to avoid Vermailan lairs. No one wanting to risk an encounter

with one, especially when they had proven themselves to be proficient and vicious killers.

It is late afternoon, and my aching feet are desperate for a rest. I look up at the mountain and notice the strange landscape in front of us. A wide circle of nothing but death and emptiness runs out from the darkened peaks. All signs of life just stop, it is as if something had drawn a line in the sand and forbid anything to grow on one side.

On one side, numerous bunches of spikey plants grow in the yellow orange sand, on the other side nothing, just lifeless empty grey dirt and a few small rocks here and there. Looming high in the background is Mt Wolner. With another hour or two of walking, we should reach it.

“Okay, this is weird,” Tash announces as everyone comes to a stop between two small bramble bushes and inspects the strange landscape in front of us.

Lexa crouches down and cautiously reaches out to touch the grey dirt on the dead side of the line. She grabs a small handful and lets it run gently through her fingers. “It seems that it is safe to touch, but the reason for this dead zone concerns me,” Lexa says as she stands and wipes her hand on her pants.

“Lexa is right. This dead zone thing is creepy and I vote we go around.” Lucas proposes as he toes the edge of the red dirt with his boot.

I look at the ring of bare dirt. “It looks like it circles all the way around the mountain.”

Tash stands next to me and squints at the mountain. “I think Claire is right. If we are determined to reach the mountain, I think we need to go through this,” she says gesturing at the space between us and the mountain base.

Lexa’s jaw tightens, and she nods. “Let’s rest on this side and eat while we can.” She turns to look at us. “Then we should do our best to collect some thick branches for torches. I don’t know what we will need on that mountain, but I don’t want a light to be one of them.”

Nathanial looks around and eyes a twisted tree about five hundred paces away. It seems like it had given up living a long time ago and all that remains are the bone-white limbs of long-dead branches. “That will do.”

We all trudge over to the small dead tree and plop down around its white trunk and share strips of dried flavourless meat. I tear into my portion and chew endlessly at the rigid strip, I get that this method of

cooking keeps the meat good for a long time, but there must be a way to make it more palatable. By the time I have finished my allotted share, my jaw is sore, and even my hungry stomach quietens at the threat of another piece.

I stand up and do a slow walk around the tree, that's when I spot a fireplace and more rubbish. "The guards have been here too," I say.

Lucas pops his head around the ghostly trunk and looks wearily at the blackened branches. "Is it still hot?"

I toe the wood, and it rolls over revealing white ash but nothing more. "No, this has been out for some time."

"What on Katera are the guards doing out here?" Tash mumbles as she looks at the mess.

Nathanial shrugs. "Occasionally they are sent out on missions to secure something or just retrieve something Darkmor fancies."

"What could Darkmor want from out here?" Tash enquires.

"Most frequently, guards are sent to these kinds of places to retrieve potential mates for Darkmor. He is looking for a woman who can carry his legacy." Nathanial replies.

I shudder for the poor women. It doesn't seem like a happy union.

"How do you know all this?" I enquire as I poke through the trash to see if the guards have left anything of use behind.

I glance over at Nathanial, his face closes over, and he walks away without a word.

"Did I say something I shouldn't have?" I ask the group.

Tash gives me a small smile. "Nathanial doesn't talk about his past. We still don't know what he did before he joined our rebel camp."

"The past can be painful Claire," Lexa says. "It is best not to re-live it, or you might get stuck there."

I nod and return to the tree, its massive white branches daring to hang over the line of 'dead zone.'

"It's kind of sad pulling these branches off. It is almost like a giant stuff you to the dead zone," Tash says thoughtfully as a loud crack echoes through the space. We all turn to look at Melissa, who has a massive branch in her hand, she gives us a grin and retunes to her work full of enthusiasm.

Sometimes, I feel like Melissa's destructive streak runs a little deep. I sit back on the ground and watch Melissa gleefully rip off more branches.

“Aren’t you going to help?” Lucas inquires.

I gesture to Melissa. “And ruin the highlight of her day?”

We both glance at her as she works on a particularly stubborn branch.

“I haven’t seen her this happy for a long time,” Lucas says.

“Not since she hit her head,” I agree.

Lucas plops down beside me. “That bite messed her up too.” He looks at me and fidgets with his hands. “Sometimes,” he pauses. “Sometimes, she is different.”

I think back to my first encounter with Melissa. “She has always been different,” I counter.

“No,” Lucas says and looks back at her. “Melissa has been my best friend for a long time, but lately it is like she is a completely different person at times. She has these moments, where it is like she isn’t there are all, then she has wild mood swings, and she can forget entire conversations.” He looks at me. “Could that just be lingering effects of the hit she took?”

I grimace and dig my nails into the back of my hand. “I don’t know. I have never seen someone take a hit like that and live before. Everything from here is new territory,” I confess, “Most of my medical knowledge comes from my mother, and even that is limited.”

He nods, and an echoing crack erupts from the tree where Melissa now holds the difficult branch in the air triumphantly, “Ha! No tree beats me!”

I smile and shake my head. A loud rip tears my eyes from Melissa to land on Tash who is using her dagger to cut strips off the blanket we had taken from the first guards camp to hide our tracks. Lucas climbs to his feet and begins wrapping the branches with the strips of material. He carefully winds the fabric around and around, securing it with a small piece of wire from a spool Tash keeps in one of her many belts before moving on to the next.

This process takes a little while, and Melissa uses this opportunity to build a small fire with the left-over branches and pulls a cup and a small package from her bag. “Anyone else for a cup of tea?”

I quickly fish out my own cup and put it beside hers as she sprinkles in some dried leaves. The smell is strong and minty.

I consider the fire, and I rub my still sore jaw. “Do you think that meat would be any better stewed?”

“That would depend a lot on what you mean by better,” Tash remarks. “It would certainly make it easier to chew if you boiled it for a few hours, but with that as the sole ingredient I doubt the taste would improve.”

Lexa places her cup in the line waiting for hot rocks. “I cannot imagine the texture would be pleasing either.”

I eye the mountains, so close now, it is hard to ignore the terrible feeling its nearness gives me. A spark of yellow light erupts from the topmost peak lashing out wildly and striking the side of the mountain with a small boom. The rest of the group look towards the mountain at the sound.

A large wave of rocks tumbles off the side grinding and banging against one another as they fight to be the first to reach the ground. The largest rock hits the ground with a thunderous crash, and a cloud of dust rises, racing away from the mountain.

“What was that?” Grunts Nathaniel, rising to his feet to get a better look.

I swallow. “I’m not sure. I have never seen anything like it before.”

Nathaniel spins to face me. “You saw it? Was it a weapon?”

“I don’t know, it was a bright yellow light snaking out from the top of the mountain.” Nathaniel gives me a disbelieving face. “It only lasted for a moment,” I finish lamely.

“Light doesn’t make sound,” Lucas adds unhelpfully.

Lexa peers intently at the top of the mountain. “It is best to assume whatever it was is not our friend until we are sure of otherwise.”

“It might have just been a freak event,” Lucas offers and pushes up his glasses.

I look at the deep scar in the side of the mountain and hold desperately to Lucas’s conclusion. I don’t want to imagine what could happen if that flash of light is a weapon. I shudder as I recall the flying devices that had found us and Miss Q. Before that day, I didn’t even know it was possible to do that kind of damage in so short a time frame.

I drag my eyes from the mountain and fish hot rocks out of the fire, dropping them into my cup. The water is brought to a rolling boil in seconds, and a minty smell fills the air. We drink our tea in silence and all too soon we are ready to move on again. Lexa leads us out into the dead zone, and we follow her purposeful strides, each of us clutching a newly made torch. Such a long walk to a scary place gives my brain plenty of

time to come up with a variety of awful scenarios about what might be living up there.

“There are footprints over there,” Nathaniel grunts, pointing a little to our left.

I look, but I see nothing. Maybe his height lets him see further.

Lexa stops, and her gaze follows Nathaniel’s finger. “Let’s go have a look, footprints might mean a path.”

“Footprints could mean a dozen other more unpleasant things too,” Lucas mumbles.

We redirect and follow Nathaniel as he leads us a little way to the left, and we make our way onto the hard-packed ground. Many footprints have scuffed up the ground.

“My guess is that the guards passed through this way, and it leads to the mountain.” Nathaniel declares.

“What! The guards that followed us to the Vermillion lair?” Lucas asks and casts about a nervous glance.

Melissa walks around inspecting the tracks. “Yes, these tracks would have been made by a troop a similar size to that one. But these tracks are old and rounded, these were made before we met the guards.”

Lucas visibly relaxes, but I don’t feel his sense of ease. I look at the mountain, and this new path certainly leads to what looks like a cavernous break in the mountain. A dark hole looming in the distance.

“I assume that will be the way up the mountain,” Lexa remarks gesturing to the end of the path. There is a moment of fragile silence before Lexa lifts her bag higher on her shoulder and sets off.

The rest of the group hurry after her and I follow on, my feet dragging through the sandy dirt. All too soon, we are standing in front of the gaping entryway.

“Alright.” Lucas mumbles and fidgets with his flint. “Let’s get this horror show started before I’m too tired to scream.”

“Light the torches,” Lexa commands and Tash pulls a jar of thick dark liquid from her backpack and carefully pours it over the cloth-bound branches. Once all of them are soaked in the foul-smelling liquid Lucas is quick to start lighting them.

He lights one and I stop his hands before they can light the next. “How long will these burn for?” I ask.

Lucas pauses and considers the question. "The wood is old, but the cloth and oil are of good quality. I would say thirty or forty minutes," he finally answers.

I point at the mountain. "How long do you think we will be in there for?"

"Uhh." He looks at the mountain and swallows.

I look at Lexa. "We don't have enough torches."

"We should go back and get some more. It won't add too much time to our trip." Melissa suggests as she carefully removes her unlit torch from the pile. "We have more oil and cloth, right?"

Lucas and Tash nod and quickly pack their things back into their bag.

"We can't go back," Nathaniel says ushering us towards the opening.

"Why not?" I protest as I am pushed towards the dark opening. "Who knows what is in there?"

"I am more concerned with what is out here." Nathaniel points behind us. "Vermillion!"

I swing around to see a Vermillion pull itself out of the loose earth and cast about, sniffing the air. Apparently, the dead zone isn't as dead as we first thought. The beast swings its head to look right at us, and it wails into the fading light of the cavern.

"Time to go," I agree, and we run towards the darkness.

The beast chases after us, its many yellow legs pounding the ground like a terrible drumbeat. As we approach the mountain it speeds up, determined to get to us before we can reach the open pass. Another Vermillion bursts from the ground beside us, showering us with sand and small rocks. It's enormous bug eyes fix on us, and its pincers work continuously at the air as if they are warming up in anticipation of a good meal. We veer off to the side, but it is so close that outrunning it is a basic impossibility. It wriggles its many pointed feet in the air as it coils to launch at us, and Lexa slows down, drawing her sword and putting herself between the beast and the rest of the group. She looks so small.

"Lexa!" I yell, but she stands firm.

The new Vermillion pauses surprised or perhaps amused by its meal's sudden defiance. The first Vermillion wails and ploughs into the side of the second, slightly larger beast with a sound like a collapsing rock face and they go down in a tangle of legs. Their pointed tails stabbing violently at the ground as they attempt to impale one another. Sand flies everywhere

as they struggle together, and I run back to Lexa, grab hold of her hand and pull her in the direction on the mountain. Together we run towards the gaping entrance, the flames of Lucas' torch roars in the wind as we enter the darkness.

We barrel through the dim passage, with only the light of the torch to help us avoid jutting rocks and sudden twists and turns. We keep running until the fighting beasts in the distance can no longer be heard.

We come to a stop, and I put my hands on my knees, and I draw much-needed air into my lungs. Slowly the thundering of my pulse in my head quietens, and the lingering burn of a hard run settles in my legs. I glance up to see two enormous spindly legs retreat into the darkness just outside the ring of light.

Lexa's hand grips mine tightly, and one look at her pale face tells me she seen it too. "From the pan and into the fire," she breathes.

Clicking echoes through the darkness as many large somethings scuttle away from us. Our group instinctively tightens up, and the Lucas's torch is held out to cast as much light as possible.

"They don't like the light," Lucas exclaims.

I glance around and eye the five unlit torches. "Yes, but how long will we have it for?"

Chapter Five

“We need to keep moving,” Lexa urges, gently nudging me further along the narrow winding path.

“Wait,” I say. “We should light a second torch in case the first goes out.”

Nathanial’s eyes glint in the light. “You were the one who said we shouldn’t light them all.”

“I don’t want to light them all. Just one more,” I insist. “On the run from whatever these are when the only thing keeping them away is the light is not a good time to be fumbling in the dark to light a second torch if the first fails.”

Lexa grips my hand and nods. “Light a second torch.”

Tash is quick to slide her torch out of the straps of her backpack and tip it, so it connects to Lucas’s. The torch hisses and a burst of light flairs as it catches, expanding the ring around us. Things scuttle away in the darkness, just out of sight.

“One torch at the front and one at the back,” Lexa commands. Nathanial takes the torch from Tash and takes her place at the front of the group. Lexa nods at him. “Now move.”

We hurry forward, the path narrowing until the group is forced to walk in pairs with our lit torches barely casting enough light to cover all of us. Small rocks tumble down the side of the sheer faces on either side of us, knocked loose by whatever is following us in the darkness.

“This is so messed up,” Lucas whines as we catch a glimpse of many shining eyes reflecting in the firelight above us, accompanying the sound of frantic clicking.

“That noise is becoming louder. Whatever is making it must be agitated by the light,” Nathanial comments holding his torch high.

“I think it is likely that the increased sound is due to more things making it,” Melissa comments dryly, causing Lucas to whimper softly.

I swallow heavily. I share his sentiments.

Something drops into the firelight above us and dangles just inside the ring of light. Many long white legs work their way through the air before they withdraw into the darkness once more.

“What are they!” Tash hisses staring intently into the darkness as if by will alone she can catch another glimpse of the creatures within it.

We weave our way through the narrow path and come upon a section where a large rock has fallen off the cliff face and now blocks most of the path. We are going to have to squeeze between it and the wall. Nathaniel goes first and with a grunt he forces his way through the narrow gap. As I slide through, the rock touches my face, it is cold and damp causing a row of goose bumps to travel down my neck and crawl into my spine.

I come to the other side to find Nathaniel stopped and holding his torch high. Everyone else joins us and he points at a vast wriggling white mass in front of us. “What is that?”

Lexa pushes her way to stand beside him. “I don’t know, I have never seen anything like it.”

The mass is easily as tall as Nathaniel and takes up the entire pathway in front of us. Its constantly moving surfaces makes me shudder and I fight the desire to step back.

“Well, it is blocking the pathway,” Nathaniel grunts as he crouches, picks up a large rock and tosses towards the twisting pile.

The moment the rock hits them, it breaks apart and hundreds of grey long-limbed spiders erupt in every direction fleeing from the potential danger. The spiders charge over us, knocking us to the ground with their large but surprisingly light bodies, their feet clicking loudly as they disappear into the darkness once more. I lay curled in a ball until I am sure it is over. Slowly I uncurl, hardly daring to believe the only damage I had suffered from a wave of giant spiders is some bruising. And perhaps, the nightmares I am sure to have.

Both torches lay on the sandy ground. Sand coats the oils and causes the flames to splutter with the last moments of life. “The torches!”

I crawl towards it, and Lucas’s torch dies altogether leaving only one other torch still lit. I grasp it and hold it in the air, but it only flickers for a few moments before it goes out completely, leaving us in total darkness.

“Lucas,” comes Lexa’s voice. “We could really use some more light.”

“Hang on,” There is some rustling and then. “Okay I have the flint I need a torch.”

“These need more oil, the sand has completely covered it,” I say lowering it back to the ground to fumble at my pack attempting to find the spare torch I carry in the dark.

Melissa is on the ground to my right and mutters, "This one isn't any better."

"I have one," Tash says, and I hear fumbling through the darkness. I stop what I am doing and pull my backpack back on.

"I can't see a damned thing," Lucas whines.

"Hang on," says Tash. "I'm on my way."

Tash bumps into me on her way past, and I strain to see anything in the darkness. It's no use, I couldn't see my hand in front of my face if I wanted to. Nathaniel curses loudly.

"I can't be that heavy," Tash remarks.

"It's not you," Nathaniel replies in the dark. "Something bit me."

On Nathaniel's arm a small, winged creature begins to glow bright orange, casting a dim light on the rock wall behind him and a spider screeches and slinks away.

Nathaniel slaps at the winged creature, and bright orange fluid splatters everywhere and the beast falls to the ground dead. Blood runs down Nathaniel's arm flowing from two puncture wounds lit up by the glowing orange fluid.

Piercing pain erupts from my leg, and a small furry creature begins to glow there. Orange tones highlight the bones in its wings and body the creature readjusts, and it eyeballs me, its claws gripping to the fabric of my pants as it scrabbles to get a better grip.

Horried I grab it and pull it off my leg, its wings struggling feebly under my grip. The thing is no bigger than my closed fist. It turns its squished snout towards me, its tiny eyes glinting in the near darkness as it rams its large, pointed ears forward wriggling them listening to sounds I can't hear. From the front of its face, two long teeth protrude, dripping blood onto my hand. Dripping my blood. Sudden repulsion flies through me, and I fight the urge to fling the creature away.

"Give it to me," Melissa demands.

I happily pass her the glowing orange bloodsucker and wipe the blood from my hand.

Melissa turns it in her hands. "It is some kind of bat."

"Yeah, well I haven't seen a bat that drinks blood before," Nathaniel comments, still trying to stem the bleeding on his arm.

"Why are we only being attacked by them now?" Tash asks.

“Lucas,” Lexa says in the darkness. “How are you going with that torch?” Silence meets her words.

Tash replies, “I still have it.”

“Lucas?” Lexa repeats, louder this time, her voice echoes through the chamber.

I cast around in the darkness but see nothing. We need those torches. “Anyone else have a way to light these torches?”

“I have some flint,” Lexa says somewhere to my right.

I feel my way towards her and scrape my palms on a sharp rock, fumbling I find her and slip my torch from my backpack and find Lexa, my hand brushing her waist as I fumble around in the dark. Lexa grabs my waist and pulls me close as we fumble in the dark with the torch. I feel her body jolt and a spark lights up between us. I catch a glimpse of hundreds of little furry creatures lining the walls, and my heart squeezes in my chest. One or two bites might be annoying, but if all of them tried to feed on us.

I shudder at the thought and push it deep into a dark corner of my mind.

“Lexa, hurry,” I say lowering my hand from her waist and pulling my necklace out of my hidden pocket to drape it around my neck. The gemstone glows faintly and offers a weird blue light to our surroundings.

Lexa gets the fire to take, and the torch lights up with a big roar of flames. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of the vampiric bats scuttle away from the light. The one in Melissa’s hand squirms and squeals as if the light caused it physical pain. She frowns and lets the creature go. It launches out of her palm and into the darkness. Lexa holds the torch up high, and a cluster of bats fly off a small curled up mound, fleeing in terror from the light.

“Lucas!” Melissa yells and runs towards the mound. She rolls him over and reveals him pale, sweating and covered in dozens of heavily bleeding puncture marks.

I kneel and inspect the bites. They are the same as the one on my leg. “They didn’t glow,” I say dimly.

“What?” Says Melissa agitation colouring her voice.

“The bats feeding on him didn’t glow like they did when they bit Nathaniel and me,” I say as I try to tie the strips of fabric Tash is handing me around the worst of Lucas’s wounds.

“Why is that important?” She snaps at me.

“We were a distraction, this attack used tactics.” I look up at Melissa. “I don’t think these are regular bats.”

Lucas rolls his head towards me, his breaths short and shallow. “I tried to call out,” he gasps. “There were so many.” His eyes droop.

Melissa pushes his long hair out of his eyes. “Stay awake, you goof.”

“I’m tired,” He mumbles curling into a ball whimpering in pain.

“We need to go before these creatures can prepare another attack. Everyone stays in the ring of light,” Lexa orders.

Nathanial scoops Lucas up and flings him over his shoulder before taking the torch from Lexa. Nathanial is the only person I know who could have juggled a fully-grown man and a flaming torch. Lexa draws her sword, and it gleams in the firelight. Melissa and I stoop to pick up the sand-covered torches, they still might be useful later.

We set off at a run and push through the narrow winding corridor of the mountain pass. The upwards incline is a punishing experience and saps my energy faster than any run twice as far on level ground. Nathanial’s struggle is evident, he has never been much of a runner, but this one might be too much.

“We need to stop,” I call out.

Lexa pauses and turns, the firelight lighting her face and defining her features. She looks at Nathanial and nods. “We should light a second torch I don’t think this one will last much longer.”

A spider scuttles out of the firelight, and as it reaches the edge, it is mobbed by dozens of bats who latch onto the spider’s abdomen. The spider lets out a horrific noise as it tries to dislodge the bats without success. The spider attempts one last roll in the dim light before charging into the darkness.

I shudder. “Maybe just a very quick rest.”

We pause in a wider gap, and we can move around as a group instead of in pairs. Melissa and Tash set about checking the last torch before it is lit and seeing what can be done about the other two. I crinkle my nose, the smell in this little hollow is horrendous. Tash gags and almost loses her last meal.

“What is that?” I ask. “It smells as bad as the compounds death pits.”

Melissa looks pale, and her hair clings to her face as Tash pours a little of our precious oil on a sandy torch. “The ground feels sticky. Maybe

it is that.”

Tash pauses to peer at the ground, but the torch splutters dangerously, and she hurries with the oil. The last of it pours over a single sand-covered torch.

Nathanial shifts Lucas on his shoulder with a grunt, and I swap my canteen for his torch. His massive hands dwarf the metal container, and he takes a single gulp before handing it back. “Thanks.”

I nod, and we exchange our burdens once more.

I touch Lexa’s arm. “Should we use the necklaces?”

She hesitates. “It will wear us out further.” Her emerald eyes flicker over my face. “And yet, we are no good to our cause dead.”

Melissa touches the new torch to Nathaniel’s, and it flares into life, throwing back the creeping darkness and revealing about a dozen withered bodies in scarlet armour. This time Tash does throw up.

Nathanial grimaces. “Well, now we know what the smell is.”

I stare at the ten bodies and have a niggling feeling. Something familiar. “The guards,” I say slowly.

Nathanial grunts. “Yes, those are guards.”

“No, not them,” I say. “The guards that were chased off by the Vermillion said they have lost almost a dozen men on the way to the witch.”

Lexa looks at the guards. “The witch at the top of the mountain and a light that can destroy things.” She pauses. “She may have the next necklace.”

“Hopefully she is more friendly than she sounds,” Lucas mumbles from his place dangling on Nathanial’s shoulder. “Either way, I would really like to leave now.”

His face is pale, and I can see the sheen of sweat from here. I am suddenly reminded that our source of light won’t last for much longer. “He is right, we need to go.”

“I can walk,” Lucas protests.

“And I’m one of those fairy tale ballerinas,” Nathaniel remarks, showing not the slightest inclination of letting Lucas down.

Despite myself, my mouth creeps into a smile. From the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Lexa retrieving her necklace from her hidden pocket and slips it over her head where it glows against her chest. We set off twisting through the winding labyrinth, a few suicidal bats brave the

light and dive towards us. I use the dead torch to batter them away, but as the light dims, more bats make an attempt and soon, all of us are covered in bites that don't seem to stop bleeding.

We round a corner, and a giant spider turns, clicks at us and then swiftly retreats on a silvery thread into the inky darkness. Melissa looks up at it and absently rubs her neck where she was bitten. Suddenly a loud wail pierces the darkness. For a moment, everything is still as the last of the wail echoes through the twisting labyrinth. Then bats come at us from everywhere.

We run, fleeing the bats, and taking the only twists and turns not filled with them until we come upon a sheer cliff wall. Even if someone could climb that, the bats would get them before they could reach the top.

We are stuck.

I suck air into my lungs. "I think we were just herded into here."

The bats linger at the exit, climbing anxiously on the walls. Inching closer and closer. I look at the torch, it splutters, and I swallow. We have ten minutes at most before we will be forced to use our last torch. I push away the thought of being surrounded in darkness and defenceless from the hungry swarm of bats. Nathaniel sets Lucas down gently and draws his sword. We back up as best we can, pebbles from the cliff face tumble onto our heads and shoulders as the bats eagerly crawl above us. They aren't trying to be quiet anymore, their excited chattering is almost deafening.

"There is another body here," Lexa says.

I turn to find her crouching beside a skeleton in tattered clothing, one hand held protectively over a small wooden box and the other over a crumbling scroll. Lexa carefully removes the scroll and holds it up to the light.

"One is real, and one is not, I used to know, but I forgot.

Choose now wisely for you will see, you could end up just like me.

I am a Keeper of things once lost, but only its owner can look inside my box."

Lexa picks up the box and inspects it.

"The rhyme said Keeper. Do you think they are like Edward?" I ask.

Lexa looks back at the text. "It is capitalised like a name or title would be."

“Well, it won't matter in a few minutes,” Nathaniel says dryly as the last little bit of his torch splutters pathetically.

There is a struggle to light our final torch, we almost leave it too long, and I fear it won't catch as the other torch dims and dies. At the last moment, it catches and roars into life. We just bought ourselves another half hour if we are lucky. The clatter of claws and flapping of wings increases to an almost deafening level.

I fear it is just prolonging the inevitable.

“Perhaps if we band together, we can make an attempt at the opening while we have our torch,” Lexa muses.

“What if the torch goes out in the attempt?” Melissa asks.

I draw my dagger and grip the sandy torch in my hand. “The torch isn't going to last long. I say if we fail, it is on our terms.” The group nods.

“Ready?” Lexa asks.

Nathaniel picks up Lucas and drapes him around his shoulders, attempting to make room for as much movement as possible. “Let's do this.”

We charge at the gap and the bats flutter about widely for a moment before they bound together and outright mob us. Bats fly into my hair and bite my neck and arms. I bat them away and they fall to the ground dead. The bats are relentless, and each bite opens a new wound that won't stop bleeding.

Hundreds of bats die to our weapons but still they manage to push us back to the wall. So many replace the dead bats that it is like we haven't made a dent at all. We press against the wall, trying to stand within the brightest light of our torch. Even then, the bats take turns climbing into the flickers at the edges.

I wipe the blood from my leg. The damn thing won't stop bleeding.

Nathaniel lowers Lucas to the ground and sits beside him breathing heavily. The strips of cloth bound around Lucas are soaked in crimson and blood begins pooling in the sand beneath him.

Lucas looks at me and mumbles, “Let's use the necklaces.”

I eye his pale face and watch a bead of sweat run its way down his cheek. “They take a lot of energy. It could kill you.”

“At this rate. I'm gonna die anyway. Might as well try to get the rest of you out of here,” he says breathlessly. He holds his arm up, and

Nathanial hauls him to his feet.

Lucas looks at us his face pale. "If I do die, please don't leave me here."

I bite my cheek and nod, an intense and unpleasant sensation builds in my throat.

I squeeze my necklace tightly. "Lexa and I have more energy, let's see if we can do it without you first."

Lucas nods and Nathanial drags him over his shoulders again and Lucas lets out a small groan.

"Stand close," Lexa commands.

The torch splutters, and I grasp her hand. A burst of green and blue light erupts from us, creating a bubble over the group. The light is so bright the bats retreat in surprise, screeching in outrage. A blue wound opens across my chest, and the searing pain screams for my attention. I look at Lexa in confusion, we have only been joined for a few seconds, Lexa's eyebrows furrow and I can tell from her expression that she is yet to receive a wound. Normally it takes longer than this for the wounds to appear. I stifle a cry as another wound burns across my stomach, and blue light can be seen pouring from under my armour.

Melissa swallows, the blue light from my wounds reflecting on her face. "Claire if you keep doing that, you can be our torch."

"Why is it happening so quickly?" Lexa demands inspecting the new wound on my hand.

I shake my head. "Do you have any?"

Lexa shakes her head. "Not one yet."

"Lucas," I gasp as another opens on my ankle. "I must be healing him."

"We need to get going," Lexa says and starts jogging tugging me along. The rest of the group follows and the bats scramble to get away from the light.

It isn't long before they realise their meal is getting away. They hurl themselves at our protective light bubble. Around twenty of the little beasts hit the shield at once, and Lexa grips my hand tightly. A bright emerald line about an inch long appears on her neck.

We twist and turn through the labyrinth always taking the route that leads up. The bats continue their assault, their numbers are endless. Each one that strikes the bubble flaps away screeching before making another

attempt. The most persistent fall to the ground dead after a few zaps from the shield bubble. At least we are culling the population. Finally, I can go no further, and I stumble and fall to my knees. Wounds cover my body, and blue light pours from me like I'm a lantern.

Lexa looks at me concerned, and Tash pushes over to inspect me. "Why is she so much worse than you?" Tash demands.

"Claire's power is healing," Lexa says her voice pained.

Tash looks over the group. "But we are all hurt, we have hundreds of wounds between us from the bats." She looks back at me. "Is she healing all of us at once?"

I cry out as another wound opens on my arm and I grasp it, blue light streaming through my fingers.

Lexa grips my hand tightly. "Yes, she is."

Another thankfully smaller wound opens above my eyebrow, and I let out a small groan.

Tash grips my arm and looks at me. "Stop, Claire. You cannot heal all of us look at what it is doing to you. Stop healing me, I will be fine."

"I can't," I breath. "Not without turning off this," I say as I wave my hand at the bubble around us. "I can't control it."

Lexa is about to speak when Lucas cuts her off. "Hey big guy," he says patting Nathaniel's shoulder. "You can put me down now. I am feeling much better."

Nathaniel lowers him to the ground, and Lucas really does look much better, he is still very pale but most of his wounds seem to have stopped bleeding. Come to think of it, so have mine. Bats assault the bubble, and it flashes green before they fly away for another attempt. Their little bodies are everywhere around the bubble making it impossible to see where to go.

"We need to move," Lexa says, urgency in her words as she kneels beside me. I take a moment to lean against her before I nod.

"But which way?" Melissa asks. "I can't see a bloody thing through all these bats."

Lucas comes over and takes hold of my arm. Brilliant purple light is added to our bubble and makes it impossibly brighter and strange tentacles swing from the surface. The bats back off and the few that do charge the bubble are grasped by the tentacle, and pulsing green light zaps them until they die.

It is a gruesome sight.

Lucas gives me a smile. "Thanks for the help, Claire."

Tash points to the right of us. "Does anyone see that? Is that light?"

Up a daunting slope is the tiniest speck of light. It is hard to be sure because so much light pours from my body that it is hard to see anything around it.

"Yes," Melissa practically shouts.

Lexa shifts and wraps my arm around her shoulder, and slips her arm around my waist, lifting me to my feet. Lucas does the same on my other side and we move towards the exit. The bats increase their assault on our light bubble desperate to prevent our escape.

Black fights its way into the edges of my vision, and I stumble, unable to walk any further as Lexa and Lucas are forced to drag me along. The light around us begins to flicker and bats dart in through the sporadic flashing. Nathaniel, Tash, and Melissa fight them off. Light pours from me and it hurts everywhere. I am just an enormous ball of pain with no start or end. Another wound opens on my face, and it feels as if it runs from ear to nose. I drop my head and black swims into my vision threatening to overtake me.

Bats rush in through the flickering light and screeches and shouts can be heard around me. I force my way back to consciousness and the light emerges around us once more. Nathaniel is in front of us ripping bats from my legs and Lexa's arm.

"Claire cannot do this for much longer," Lexa gasps from the effort of half carrying half dragging me up the hill. "It is killing her."

"Don't worry about me," I gasp as another wound opens across the back of my thigh. "I can make it to the exit."

"I am more concerned about your survival once we get there Claire," Lexa hisses anger and fear making her words sharp.

I lift my head to look at Lexa every fibre and sinew within me screaming at the movement. Her face has a smear of blood across her right cheek and an emerald wound opens up above her eyebrow as I watch. Our eyes meet, and I hold the contact for as long as I can manage before I allow my head to drop again as a wound opens up on the back of my neck.

"We are nearly there," Nathaniel says from behind me. "Let me carry her, you and Lucas can keep hold of her, but it will be faster if I do it."

We stop and I am lifted into the air by two strong arms. Suddenly I am being lurched about and I can tell from the roughness that we are

moving much faster. Nathaniel's heavy breathing is mixed in with the sounds of pounding feet and finally we step into the cavern light and out of the eternal darkness of the chasm. The bat's screech but don't dare cross into the light cavern.

"The bats have stopped following us," Tash declares.

Nathaniel lowers me softly to the ground and releases me. I feel Lexa let go of my hand and Lucas's removed from my ankle. The light around us dies abruptly and the relief is almost all consuming. Fire burns all over my body and I take in a deep breath and allow my head to roll to the side. I see Lexa take her necklace off and shove it into her pocket before she moves over and pulls me into her arms. My eyes close both in the relief of having Lexa near and the agony my wounds being pressed.

"Tash, get the healing paste from my backpack." Lexa commands and I know no more.

Chapter Six

When I wake, I find I am in a small cave laying on a pile of travel blankets, I struggle to roll my head to the side and find Lexa asleep beside me. I watch her even breathing and take in her peaceful features, marred by small emerald wounds here and there. Shuffling brings my attention to Lucas who sits diligently on a rock, his necklace grasped contemplatively in his hands and a violet wound under his right eye. I sit up, careful not to wake Lexa. The movement agitates many of my magical wounds, and a small groan escapes me.

Lucas looks up, his blonde hair falling in his eyes. A faded purple line cuts through his left eyebrow. “How are you feeling? You have been asleep for almost a day.”

“A little better,” I reply as I glance at the numerous blue wounds across my arms. “That was a rough ride.”

Lucas nods. “That it was.” He pauses. “Those wounds wouldn’t have stopped bleeding on their own, I think you might have even helped me get some blood back. Thank you.”

I put my head in my hands as a pounding settles there. “Don’t mention it.”

“Are you able to turn off your healing?” Lucas inquires.

I shake my head. “I don’t seem to be able to control any aspect of the gem, except for making contact of course.”

Lucas looks at me. “I can control mine. Just in little bursts.”

“What?” I say raising my head.

Lucas takes a deep breath, and his necklace begins to glow. A purple tentacle appears on the wall and swings around somewhat aimlessly.

“That is amazing,” I say. “I can’t do anything like that with mine.”

Lucas smiles. “I’m sure it will come.”

“How do you do it?” I ask leaning forward to watch the little tentacle.

Lucas rubs his chin. “I just kind of think really hard about what I want to do and ask the gem to do it.”

“Do you think I want to use magic? Or is specific like create a tentacle?”

“Specific.” Lucas nods.

I look around the empty cave fighting the sudden wave of discomfort. “Where are the others?”

The little tentacle picks up a rock and flings it aimlessly at a wall. “They have gone to look for food.” Lucas remarks pushing his glasses up his nose. “We saw some smaller,” He pauses to use quotation marks. “Spiders while we were looking for cover. Melissa thinks they might be edible if cooked.”

I grimace.

The ground shakes, and small stones fall from the roof. I look around in alarm. “Should we be resting in a cave?”

Lucas lets out a dry laugh. “This whole place is a cave. The ground shakes have been happening for a while now. They began just after you passed out. A few more sky rocks have come through the cavern roof too.”

I push away thoughts of Edwards vision as a thunderous crash bursts into my ears and the ground shakes more violently this time, waking Lexa.

She rubs her face. “Is it still happening?”

“Non-stop since you went to sleep,” Lucas confirms. “Although that has been the biggest one yet.”

“Any sign of Darkmor or his minions?” Lexa asks.

“Nothing, I think they are too busy at present.” He points at the cave entrance. “From up here, it looks like one of the sky rocks hit somewhere very near the capital.”

I stretch my legs and grit my teeth at the burn of the muscle and the magical wounds. “Let’s hope that distraction lasts long enough for us to get away from here.”

Nathanial, Tash, and Melissa jog into the entrance of our small cave. Nathanial removes his knapsack and empties it onto the ground. Three spiders with bodies the size of a head land on the ground, their legs curled up in a death embrace.

Beside him, Melissa drops an armload of red rocks that have left smudges all over her arms and shirt. She begins to arrange them around the remains of our torches.

Tash drops her bags. “That last shake caused the labyrinth we came through to collapse. We won’t be going back out that way.”

I rub my face. “I can’t say I am disappointed.”

Lucas allows his tentacle to disappear and goes over to help Melissa, stacking heavy rocks in a circle. Melissa pulls a fist sized white rock out

of her pocket and holds it up for Lucas to see. "Look at what I found."

Lucas turns to her and his jaw drops. "Can we please use it to light the fire?" he begs.

Melissa winks and begins scraping the white rock against another and it slowly grounds into a white powder.

"I will get some wood," Nathaniel announces. "There is a bramble bush not too far from here,"

Tash looks up from the bags. "I will come with you. We should examine the perimeter as well."

Nathaniel nods and together they leave the cave. I glance over to the large wood pile stacked nearby. How long do they think we will be staying here?

Soon Lucas and Melissa have the fire pit ready, and Melissa sprinkles the white power on a branch she has made flat with her knife and carefully places it on the stacked pile of twigs.

Melissa bends down with her flint. "I recommend you look away," she says. "This will be really bright when it catches."

I cast my eyes to the floor and a burst of bright light fills our cave for about half a second before fading. When I look up, the pile of kindling is roaring with flames and Melissa gives Lucas a high five.

"That was awesome," Lucas says looking at the fire with a gleam in his eyes.

Melissa nods and the pair begin feeding the fire, stoking it so it creates embers for cooking. They work on it for a long time before Melissa leaves the fire to Lucas and goes over to the dead spiders. She draws a knife from her belt and makes quick work of the spiders removing the abdomens and places the remainders of the bodies in a pile. The spiders look strangely small without the pointed abdomens, and the brown goo that oozes out of the severed parts makes me extremely glad we don't need to eat them.

She collects the abdomens and rises to her feet and heads for the exit. "I will get rid of these and see if Nathaniel and Tash need any help bringing back the wood."

"They have been gone for ages," Lucas remarks.

"Perhaps the brambles are hard to break apart?" I say recalling the flexible spindly branches.

I shuffle over to the fire and help Lucas feed it in preparation for dinner. "Some of those bramble branches they are bringing back might work well to spit roast the spiders."

"I have heard roasted spider is good," Lucas says stirring the embers with a short stick. "We would need good enough branches to stick into the ground though. None of what we already have is good enough."

Pounding footsteps announce the arrival of Melissa as she rushes back into the cave, her face slightly red and a grin plastered across it. She looks positively ecstatic.

"Why do you look so happy?" I ask.

"Did you find them?" Lexa asks at the same time. "Did they examine the perimeter?"

Melissa's grin gets impossibly wider. "Oh, I think Nathaniel was doing a very thorough examination of Tash."

Lucas looks up. "Why? Is Tash hurt?"

Nathaniel and Tash burst into the cave, Nathaniel red faced and Tash tugging her shirt down and roughly tucking it back into her pants.

After a moment of stunned silence, I find myself grinning and I chance a glance at Lexa, whose eyebrows are doing their best to crawl into her hair line.

Lucas looks at them concerned. "Tash, is your chest hurt?"

"No," Tash says breathless. "Why would you ask?"

"Why else would Nathaniel need to do a thorough examination of your chest?" He asks scratching his head.

Melissa who had barely been containing her glee, bends double and lets out a burst of hysterical laughter at Lucas's comment.

Lucas looks confused. "No really, if Tash isn't hurt why would Nathaniel be interested in examining her chest?"

Melissa falls to the ground shaking with laughter. "Stop." She pleads in between laughter. "I can't take much more."

Lucas sits back on his heels and silently considers Tash and Nathaniel, like this whole situation is a puzzle that has missing pieces. Melissa calms down enough to pull herself from the floor, her eyes meet Tash's and she snickers.

"Mel," Tash says, her tone warning but playful.

Melissa holds up her hands. "Hey, I'm not judging. It's about time." She smiles again. "It's not how I thought I would find out. But it's about

time you two sorted yourselves out.” Melissa casts a glance at me and wriggles her eyebrows.

I shift and try not to look at Lexa.

Nathanial scratches the back of his head and clears his throat awkwardly. His eyes land on the embers ready for cooking and points at them. “I will–uhhh.” He clears his throat again and says, “Cooking rock.” Before he turns on his heel and marches out of the cave without further explanation.

Tash comes to sit beside Lucas who is still looking at her intently. She looks at him with a smile and says, “Okay, out with it before Nathanial comes back.”

“You’re not hurt?” Lucas clarifies.

“No,” Tash says.

Lucas scratches his chin. “So why did you have your shirt off – Ohhh.” Realisation dawns on his face.

Melissa plops down beside him and gives him a gentle shove. “Yes, they were coupling, oh mighty slow one.”

Lucas pauses and in a genuine voice asks, “Are you trying to get pregnant?”

“No!” Tash squeaks.

He sits back on his heels and once again looks confused. “I don’t understand,” He remarks. “If you’re not trying to get pregnant, why would you want to couple?”

Tash shifts uncomfortably, “Well–.”

“Because it’s fun,” Melissa cuts in grinning. Tash lets out a relieved breath and shoots Melissa a thankful smile.

Lucas grimaces and shakes his head. “I can understand going through the process to make a baby. But any other reason is just a nope for me.”

Melissa looks at Lucas intently. “How about with men?”

Lucas looks at Melissa like she just grew a second head. “Melissa,” he says slowly. “Two men cannot make a baby.”

I smile and Tash lets out a small bark of laughter at his delivery.

Lexa sits up and wraps her blanket around herself. “So, you are saying that to you, coupling is repugnant and only worth enduring for procreation?”

Lucas nods. “Exactly. It is perfectly possible to love someone without it getting all icky.”

“Well,” Melissa says slapping her hands on her thighs. “You learn something new every day.”

Nathanial reappears with a large flat rock that I am sure only he could carry and places it on top of the embers. Lucas gives the large rock a solid push and when it doesn’t move, he nods. Tash goes to collect the prepared spiders and places them on the rock and each connection is met with a loud sizzle. Lucas summons his little tentacle again, this time perched beside the hot rock, and it begins to turn the spiders.

I gape in disbelief, I have had my necklace for over a year now and I can’t use it without almost killing myself, Lucas has his for a little over two months and has already learned to cook with it. I fight back a wave of jealousy and resolve to try harder with my own gem.

Tash plops on a rock beside us and gives me a grin. “I bet you are looking forward to something to eat.”

I glance at the spiders. “I am hungry,” I confirm. “But I cannot say I am thrilled at the idea of eating spiders.”

Tash nods. “I’m not surprised you’re hungry. Before your healing light, Lucas’s wounds wouldn’t stop bleeding. I was worried it was some kind of toxin that stopped it from healing.” She pauses to readjust one of her many belts. “I don’t know how he would have lived without it.”

Melissa drags her own rock over accompanied by a dreadful grinding as it leaves deep scratches on the rock floor. “It wasn’t just Lucas. I have had a headache for weeks.” She drops onto her rock and pulls out one of her knives, spinning it in her fingers. “Now it’s better. You healed a graze I had on my knee too.” Melissa pulls up her left pant leg to demonstrate the undamaged skin.

Lexa looks at me with concern. “No wonder it took such a huge toll on your body. You were healing our whole group of just about every minor affliction.”

“Hey,” Melissa protests. “Nothing about that headache was minor.”

I grimace and try not to move too much. Lexa spots the movement and begins digging through my knapsack. She retrieves the healing cream.

“No,” I say. “We may need it for a more serious wound.”

Lexa unscrews the lid. “Claire some of your wounds are serious. I have already had to apply the healing cream to most of them.”

I raise my hand to my stomach and try not to think about Lexa and my top off. I shift as my lower stomach flutters at the thought. I look up to

find Lexa watching me with an intensity that makes my heart race and my mouth dry.

Tash points at a particularly long blue line on my forearm. “That alone would turn me into a big sook. Have your medicine.”

I force my attention to Tash’s words as Lexa takes my arm in her cool hand and begins applying the salve.

Melissa grins. “Lexa, will you be examining Claire’s whole body for serious wounds?”

Heat rises to my face, and I stare resolutely at the stone floor.

Tash smacks Melissa in the arm. “Behave.” With that Tash shoves Melissa towards the fire to help Lucas finish preparing our meal.

Lexa clears her throat. “Claire, I mean this with the most innocent of intentions. But I do need to see the wounds on your torso and legs.” She holds the jar awkwardly in her hand and fidgets with the lid. “I cannot trust you will give them the correct treatment if left to assess the damage on your own.”

I stare at Lexa, determined to keep my thoughts on the wounds. “Uh, okay.”

Lexa rises to her feet just as Lucas turns to us and yells. “Spiders almost ready!”

She smiles at me. “Saved by the dinner bell.”

I grin at her and in a surprising surge of confidence say, “Hopefully not for forever.”

Lexa raises an eyebrow and I climb to my feet and move towards the meal Lucas and the others have prepared, leaving her to stare after me.

After a surprisingly edible meal of spider, I had fallen back asleep lulled there by a full belly, the warmth of the fire and exhaustion. An enormous shake has me start awake and the depletion of the wood pile tells me a few hours have passed. Most of the group sit up awake, except for Nathaniel who seems to be able to take advantage of sleep whenever he wants to.

I sit up and feel the wounds covered in salve are already feeling better. My stomach and back wounds ache, I should have followed up with Lexa about her help. Everyone is quiet, only the distant thunderous sounds of sky rocks pelting the cavern roof breaks the silence. I can’t help but wonder if any more have broken through like the first one.

I shake my head as I recall the earthquakes that had been occurring since the beginning of our trip. Maybe the one that broke through the surface wasn't the first one. A wound on my stomach aches and caving in, I dig through my bag looking for the salve to put on the wound. During my search I come across a small glass vial. Taking it out I recall the crate of vials the guards had been transporting across that monster filled desert. So much had happened since I picked this up that I had forgotten to show it to the group.

I abandon my search for the salve to inspect the vial closely. The liquid inside is thick and slow moving but completely clear. A crate full of these vials accompanied by such a large troop of guards must mean it is either very valuable, or very dangerous. Probably both. Thinking back to the guard's conversation, this trip is made once every month. That must mean there is a lot of this stuff somewhere. What is it for?

I run the tip of my thumb across the bumpy wooden stopper and consider the finger length vial. Why have so many small containers instead of just one large jar? Surely one or two larger glass containers would be the cheaper option.

I roll it around in my hand and finally announce. "I found this in the guards camp just before the first vermillion."

The group looks up, except for Nathaniel who continues to snore softly. Carrying Lucas through that labyrinth must have really worn him out. Or maybe it was Tash.

Lexa frowns and takes the vial from my hands. "What is it?"

I shrug. "No idea. But there was a whole crateful of them. Thirty or forty in total if I had to guess."

"This is from the desert. I didn't get a good look before all the running and screaming we did." Lucas says. "Give me a look," he demands and holds his hand out for the vial.

Lexa raises an eyebrow but hands the vial over without a word. Lucas does tend to be the expert in these kinds of matters.

As he turns the glass tube over in his hands Melissa remarks, "That is a lot of guards for some liquid in a glass."

"Do you think they picked it up, or were taking it somewhere?" Tash asks.

"They said they had come from the mountain. Surely if you didn't have to go to the top of the mountain you would go around it," I say.

The group nods. Everyone feeling the vermillion preferable to the hordes of bats within the labyrinth.

Lucas pulls the little stopper out with a ringing pop and sniffs the liquid. "It is sweet."

"Where did you get that!" Nathaniel roars.

I jump violently, reopening the wound on my stomach and I let out a soft groan as I clutch my waist. Lexa gently rubs my shoulder.

"Claire found it in the guards camp." Tash fills in pointing at the little glass jar in Lucas's hand.

Nathaniel eyes the vial with disgust. "Put the stopper on it, before it does more damage, you idiot."

I frown at the insult and my eyes land on Melissa who is staring at the glass tube like it is the most important thing in the world. The knife in her hand gripped so hard her knuckles are white.

I sense the way she is tensed, and I launch myself at her just as she jumps at Lucas with a roar.

"It's mine!" She bellows as I grab her around the waist and wrestle her to the ground. The impact of the landing sends her dagger flying.

Melissa scratches viscously at my face, drawing blood and manages to wriggle enough to get a knee into my side. I grunt again but hold her firm as she screams.

"Give it to me." She rages. "It's mine." Spit flies from her mouth as she bucks beneath me desperate to get to Lucas and the vial.

Lucas staring dumbfounded at the scene before him still holds the unstopped tube in his hand. Nathaniel lumbers over and snatches it from him shoving the stopper back inside the opening. Melissa continues to fight, one of her hands breaks free of my grip and launches for the knives on her belt. Her hand manages to grip the hilt as I draw my fist back and punch her in the head. Melissa's body relaxes as she goes limp under me. Her breathing finally evening out.

"Sorry," I mumble as I climb off her.

Lexa and Tash are by my side. The whole incident had only lasted a few seconds, but it is burned into my mind. Lexa takes my face in her hands and inspects the scratches with a worried frown.

I gently take her hands from my face. "I am okay."

She pulls her hands from mine, and they hover awkwardly in the air. "Can I see?" She says gesturing at my waist.

I nod and Lexa lifts my shirt, bright sapphire light pours from a long wound on the left side accompanied by a large red mark already showing signs of purpling. Without a word Tash hands her the last of our precious healing paste and Lexa kneels in front of me smoothing it over the wound on my side. I grimace at the burning, and I can tell from the way Lexa's shoulders tense that touching the wound causes pain for her too. I drop my hand to her shoulder and rub my thumb across the tense muscle.

Melissa groans but remains unconscious at our feet. I glance over at Nathaniel who still holds the vial in his hand and Lucas sprawled in a heap on the ground looking up at him.

"Do you know what that is?" Tash asks.

Nathaniel shakes his head. "I don't know what it is, only that I have seen it turn many good people into raging lunatics with a sudden and fanatical loyalty to Darkmor."

I look at Melissa unconscious on the floor. "It works through smell alone?" I ask.

Nathaniel shakes his head and points at Melissa. "That is the response of someone who has had this before."

Lexa rises to her feet and gently tugs my shirt back down. I frown at Nathaniel's words and reach to take the bottle from him. He holds it up out of reach and eyes me.

"I promise not to open it," I say.

He looks at me for a long moment and nods handing it back to me without a word. I take it from him and turn the vial in my hands. I pause when I see something burnt in on the stopper.

I squint at it and say, "Does this look like a triangle to anyone else?"

Lexa takes the vial, her fingers brushing mine and inspects the jar. "It does appear to be a triangle."

"It's weirdly familiar," I say, something tugging at my memory, but I cannot quite grasp it.

"It needs to be destroyed," Nathaniel grunts.

Lucas takes off his glasses, wiping them on his shirt. "Do you know how to do that safely?"

Nathaniel shrugs. "Take it outside and dump it into the dead sand." He gestures to Melissa. "It cannot stay here. She will become increasingly more desperate to get near it."

"Alright," Lexa says. "I will go do it now, before Melissa wakes."

I move to follow her. "I will come with you."

Together we leave the small cave we are camping in and head off in a random direction. I follow Lexa, trying to walk in a way that doesn't agitate my wounds. She seems to notice I am lagging and slows down to walk beside me.

"How are you feeling?" she asks.

I shrug. "Better than I was on the way up here."

Lexa nods and surveys the landscape around us. We walk for a while before we come across a large boulder and Lexa scuffs the dry dirt at the base of it with her boot. "I think here will work."

She stoops and picks up a rock, using it to dig in the soft sand. I kneel and help her scoop out the loosened grains. Finally, when the hole is about arm deep Lexa takes the vial and holds it out above the hole.

"Are you going to empty it or put the whole thing in there?" I ask.

Lexa considers the vial. "Both options offer significant potential hazards."

"What if we put the vial in the hole cover it in some sand and stomp on it?"

"Yes," says Lexa smiling at me. "Excellent idea."

My cheeks heat from her praise and I watch as she places the vial in the hole, and we cover it with a thick layer of sand. Lexa rises to her feet and stomps in the hole, a loud satisfying crunch can be heard. As she steps out, I hastily push the rest of the sand in, filling it completely. Lexa holds out her hand and I take it. She pulls me to my feet, and we begin our walk back to where the rest of our group is camped.

I stoop to pick up a small smooth rock and turn it in my fingers as we walk. Casting a glance at Lexa I ask, "What do you think about Tash and Nathaniel?"

Lexa raises an eyebrow. "It is not my place to have an opinion on the relationships of others."

I nod but say, "I think they are happy."

Flipping the rock in my hand I venture, "Lexa, have you ever had a relationship like theirs?" Lexa stops and looks at me, surprise evident in her features. I stop too and wait patiently.

Finally, Lexa lets out a small sigh. "I have not. I have had various dalliances, but nothing similar to Tash and Nathaniel."

"Dalliances?" I question and Lexa swallows.

“I have only experienced purely physical interactions. Nothing that one would call a relationship.”

My mouth goes dry, and I lick my lips. I kick at another stone by my feet as we resume walking. “Did you ever want a relationship?”

“Not then, no,” Lexa remarks scanning the area around us we walk.

My brain catches the word then and flips it repeatedly in my stomach.

“Have you?” Lexa enquires.

I shake my head. “It was too hard in the compound. You never knew who would be next to be reviewed or disappear.” I pause for a long moment and add, “Or who you would have to fight in the Arena.”

Lexa nods. “The compound does make it difficult. It is hard to focus on romance under those kinds of conditions.”

I recall that Lexa was once a gladiator too and I am thankful we were never in the Arena together.

Lexa seems slightly on edge before she enquires, “Have you had any dalliances?”

I raise an eyebrow and study her face before replying with a shrug. “No. A guard once tried, I’m not sure if that counts.”

Lexa pauses and grasps my arm forcing me to stop beside her. “You attempted to couple with a guard?”

“No,” I shudder at the thought and shake my head. “I attempted nothing of the sort. He was drunk and felt I would be entertaining I guess.” Lexa stands silently, her hand still on my arm waiting for more. “I was fighting him off when one of the nicer commanders came along and dragged him away.”

Lexa’s jaw is gripped so tight I can see the muscles working there. “Claire, that horrific event does not count.” She lets go of my arm and runs her hands through her hair in distress. “A romantic relationship or a dalliance requires consent. Explicit and clear consent on all sides.”

I take her hand gently and smile. “Then no. I have not had any romantic relationships or dalliances.”

A loud bang erupts around us, and everything begins to shake. I tumble to my knees and let out a pitiful groan at the pain that rips through my torso as the sudden movement rumbles through the magical wounds there.

Lexa falls beside me, and small rocks hit the sand around us falling with great force from the cavern roof. One falling rock hits a medium

sized boulder nearby and splits a large chunk from it, leaving a frightening crater marring its surface.

“Claire,” Lexa yells grabbing my hand and pulling me to my feet. “We must move.”

Gasping I drag myself to my feet and stumble after Lexa who leads us to a small cliff face with an overhanging just big enough for two people. Lexa pushes me towards it, and I fall to my knees and crawl into the small space.

Lexa crawls in after me. I roll to my side to try and give her more room and she has to press up against me to get undercover completely. Face to face we lay there as the rumbling intensifies. There is a loud boom that rattles my bones, and it feels like the waves of thunderous collisions continue for ages. Then the noise comes to a stop, and we wait tucked together under the overhang as the last of the rocks falling from the cavern roof make their destructive descent.

Silence descends and Lexa breaths, “I think it is safe now.”

I nod and fight back the instinct I have to pull Lexa back when she moves away and crawls back out of our hiding space.

I pull myself to my knees and stop staring at the completely changed landscape. Large rocks are everywhere, and sections of sand have been blasted into craters. Everywhere rocks litter the surface. I look up to find a large chunk of cavern roof above us is just gone. Twinkling starlight fills the space where the centre of the ceiling of Shadowsoul used to be. Large cracks run from the circular edges and look to be held in place by magic. There is no other way the rest of the roof could still be up without it.

“The cavern roof cannot take more of this assault,” Lexa says staring up at the twinkling stars above us.

I nod. “It is pretty though.”

In the distance another explosion happens and a burst of fire rolls into the air. We stare out as another explosion happens illuminating the peaks of tall buildings in the far distance. As we watch one of the buildings falls kicking dust into the air and obscuring the already distant and faded site.

“It looks like the rebels are attacking the capital,” Lexa says, her voice with a touch of pride. “Samuel is a good leader for the cause.”

I gesture at the roof. “Taking advantage of this is clever. Darkmor can’t be everywhere at once and this will stretch his resources.”

Lexa nods and runs her fingers along a long crack through the rock we had been hiding under. “We should return and ensure that the others are safe.”

I look around at the destruction and changed landscape. “I hope you know the way.”

“I do,” Lexa says, and we stumble back to the others. It takes a little longer to get back than it should have and when we finally re-enter the cave we find everyone okay and find Melissa still unconscious and tightly wrapped in a blanket. Nathaniel sits nearby watching over her.

I move over to the fire once again exhausted.

“That last one was the worst yet,” Lucas says peering out the cave entrance.

Lexa comes to sit beside me. “Another section of the cavern roof came down above us. We are fortunate to have survived.”

Lucas frowns. “I thought it was my job to be bleak.”

“Will more come down around us?” Nathaniel grunts rising to his feet.

“There is nothing left to come down,” Lexa replies. “Everything above the mountain is gone.”

The group sits in silence as we process the destruction. My eyes droop and I sit my head on my knees trying to conserve as much energy as I can. I honestly don’t think my tired body can go on for much longer without a rest.

Tash hands me a blanket, “You look exhausted. Go to sleep.”

I nod and lay down blanket tightly tucked under my chin. “Wake me if you need me.”

Chapter Seven

I awake to the smell of cooking and slowly open my eyes and attempt a cautious stretch. The burning in my legs and torso causes a small gasp, but even so, I feel better than I did when I went to sleep.

Melissa sits by the fire, a blanket around her shoulders holding a small wooden cup in her hands. She realises I am awake and passes me the cup. "Claire, I'm really sorry. I don't know what came over me."

I sit up and clasp the warm drink in my hands and give her a small smile. "It's all good."

Melissa wraps her arms around her knees, and I take a sip of the warm drink and smile at the slightly fruity flavour of the Balooga sap.

I cast a glance at her as she absently rubs her split lip. "Honestly," I say. "We are okay. The way Nathaniel described it you couldn't have behaved any differently no matter how much you wanted too."

She nods. "It doesn't really make what I did any better though does it?"

"I think it does."

Melissa smiles and I take another sip of tea before asking, "Do you recall taking that liquid before or ever seeing it?"

Melissa shakes her head. "Lexa asked me the same thing. I don't recall ever being made to take a liquid and until earlier, I didn't think I had ever encountered it. I also don't know when I would have come into contact with it or how." She rubs the two circular pink scars on her neck and realisation hits me.

"The spider bite," I say staring at her.

Melissa looks at me. "What?"

"The large grey spider that bit you had a triangle on its back, like the stopper on the vial." I say as I turn and look around for Lexa who is with Tash slicing cave mushrooms. "Lexa," I call out.

She looks up at me with a smile and rises to her feet and says something to Tash before making her way over to us.

"The spider bite," I say as soon as Lexa arrives. "The spider bite is how Melissa got a dose of that liquid."

Lexa frowns and glances at Melissa. "What makes you say that?"

I bite my lip, trying to figure out what had caused the realisation for me. “It had the same markings on it as the bottle,” I say slowly gaining more confidence with every word. “Also, Miss Q said the spider didn’t belong in the birthing grounds. Add that to the desperate way it bit Melissa when she was unconscious and no threat to it. I think its venom passed on the dose.”

Melissa rubs her neck and Lexa asks, “How could a spider produce that kind of liquid in its venom?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

Melissa nods staring into the fire. “It was after that that the headaches started. And the memory gaps. I thought it was because of the head injury.”

Lexa considers the idea and looks at me. “You only saw one bite happen?” She asks me and I nod. “But Melissa had two bites and was missing after the sky rock fell through the cavern.”

“You think the first bite happened earlier?” I ask.

Lexa nods. “It is hard to recall everything. A lot happened around that time.”

“Yeah,” I say holding up my fingers one at a time. “The machine, the sky rock, the cut rope, the python, the landslide.”

“Python?” Lexa asks with a raised eyebrow.

“A python tried to squeeze me to death in the birthing grounds,” I say with a shrug. “Or at least it felt like it.”

Lexa leans forward, her elbows on her knees. “You didn’t mention anything about a—.” Lexa trails off suddenly and looks at Melissa accusation in her eyes. “The rope. You cut the rope.”

Melissa jumps and holds up her hands. “I swear I don’t remember doing anything of the sort. I would never willingly do something to jeopardise our mission.”

Lexa looks at her expressionless and Melissa swallows.

“About a week ago Lucas said Melissa had been different since the head wound,” I interject. “He said that it was almost like she was two people and that she was having gaps in her memory.” Lexa looks at me and I say, “I believe her.”

Lexa stares into the fire for a long time before turning to Melissa. “You are not to go anywhere alone until I make a decision.”

Melissa's face crumples into one of misery and she nods. "Yes, Lexa."

Lexa rises to her feet and says to me. "I need to contact Edward. Would you like to attend?"

I cast a glance at Melissa who is staring at the fire and nod. Rising to my feet I follow Lexa to her bag where she retrieves a small package.

"Are you going to ask Edward about the vials?" I ask.

Lexa nods and replies, "I also wish to discuss a few other things with him." She continues carefully unwrapping the crystals in the bag that Carissa had linked for us.

Carefully she arranges the three white crystals into a triangle. The gems spring to life brightening before entering a rhythmic flashing. I watch them as the fade in and out. It reminds me of breathing.

Lexa sits back leaning against the cave wall behind us and says, "may I please speak with Edward and Carissa?"

I raise an eyebrow. "That was very polite." Lexa gives me a small smile that makes my heart do funny things.

"I have been informed the crystals prefer to be spoken to in this manner."

"Clarissa?" I ask.

Lexa nods.

We wait for a while and I am just about to ask if it's working when the crystals grow brighter, and small beams of light shoot out from them, turning the triangle into a small pyramid of coloured light. Within the light appears a red bearded face with a broad smile.

"Edward," Lexa greets.

"Lexa!" Edward replies with genuine enthusiasm. "It is good to see you."

Clarissa pushes her way into view and asks, "Are the sky rocks falling where you are too?"

Lexa nods. "Yes, a rock came through the roof above us and now there is nothing above the mountain. We have also experienced a few earthquakes of impressive magnitude. We will not be able to return the way we came."

Lucas lets out a bark of laughter from where he sits perched on a rock nearby. "What a pity that is. It was such a fun trip on the way up."

I can't stop the smile that creeps on to my face.

Clarissa stares at us. "Like, all the roof above the mountain is gone?"
"It appears so," Lexa replies.

Clarissa rubs her hands on her face. "The chaos that must be happening in the settlements on the surface."

That gives me pause and suddenly I feel guilty. I have never even stopped to consider what the people on the surface must be going through. Not every sky rock comes through the cavern roof, but every one of those quakes are a result of one striking the surface.

There is a long moment of silence when Lexa asks, "Do you know how the rebels are going? We can see they are attacking the capital from up here."

Edward rubs his beard. "We haven't heard from them yet. We know they were preparing to take stronger measures. We have seen the explosions from here too."

"Please let me know when you learn something. An attack on Voltren is a bold move that cannot be undone," Lexa says. "Once Darkmor is done dealing with the sky rocks he will send his army."

Edward nods. "I will enquire for you."

"Thank you." Lexa leans forward and says, "I need your advice."

Edward grins. "I would be honoured to provide it."

With that, Lexa launches into an explanation about the vials and our conclusions about Melissa being injected with the serum by means of a spider bite.

Edward rubs his beard. "I have heard about a new way to deliver the dose of the mind control liquid. Although I have had no clarity on what the new way is, just that there is one."

"I have also never heard of it working some of the time." Clarissa adds. "Normally when someone has a dose, they are completely consumed by it."

"What about Miss Q?" I ask.

Edward raises an eyebrow. "Surely you are not suggesting Miss Q is under the influence of this mind control liquid?"

I shake my head. "No. She was there when the spider bite happened, and she may have more experience in this area than we do."

Clarissa rises to her feet. "I will go get her."

"Edward, have you had any luck with learning how to control the gems?" Lexa asks. "The power uncontrolled is becoming increasingly

hazardous. Claire almost died on the way up here using her power to save us.” Lexa’s normally steady voice wavers at the end.

Edward’s face falls. “Unfortunately not. The one person I know who can help refuses to do so until they have met you.”

Lexa rubs the bridge of her nose and says, “It is okay. The healing paste has helped Claire recover. However, we have used the last of it and it will not be a solution for next time.”

Edward’s face brightens. “Ah, but it can be.” He leaves the screen for a moment and returns holding a large jar. “Carissa has made the Nilkar plant into a healing paste and said it is ready to use.”

I scratch my head and open my mouth, but Lexa takes my hand in hers and the action silences me.

Lexa smiles and says, “Thank you and Clarissa for your efforts. We will do our best to collect the paste once we have completed our mission here.”

“You don’t need to wait,” Edward chirps excitedly. “Leonardo has said he is happy to bring it to you now, he is also the one that I spoke of before. Meeting you will help him decide if he wishes to help you.”

“The way up is blocked,” I remind him.

“Leonardo has no need for such things. I will ask him to bring this to you once we are done here. He also has a knowledgeable background you may find beneficial.” Edward looks up from the dancing light and smiles at something we can’t see.

Miss Q enters the wavering light and peers at us, annoyance in her eyes. “I was summoned?”

“For your wisdom and guidance,” Lexa says smoothly.

Miss Q offers a sharp toothed grin. “How can I help?”

“The spider from the birthing grounds,” I say. “Can you recall the shape it had on its back?”

“A triangle,” Miss Q replies promptly. “The damned thing should never have been there. I have endeavoured to return and clear the birthing grounds of the menace.”

“Melissa has been different since the bite and we have discovered that at some point Melissa has been given a mind control liquid,” I say glancing at Lexa whose jaw is once again fixed in place.

Miss Q stares at us for a long time before finally venturing, “You think the spider, did it?”

I nod. The silence returns and we wait patiently for more.

“Well, I think it is quite likely,” Miss Q concludes.

“The effects seem to work intermittently on Melissa,” Lexa clarifies. “Aside from her reaction to the vial, we have found that she is more like herself than she has been for some time.”

“How unusual. I was not aware there was a way to reverse the process.” Miss Q scratches her chin. “Unless—,” She pauses and looks at me. “Unless it has something to do with Claire?”

Lexa shifts and her smooth tone develops an edge as she says, “If you are insinuating that Claire is responsible for Melissa’s behaviour—,”

“I am not.” Miss Q cuts her off in a clear voice with a raised eyebrow. “I think when Claire healed Melissa’s head wound, she did something to the effectiveness of the serum.”

My mouth falls open and I fidget with the gem in my hidden pocket.

“Has Claire used her magic again on Melissa before her sudden redevelopment of full self-awareness?” There is a short pause before Miss Q adds, “This would have been extremely taxing on Claire, the way the serum works is by attaching itself to the blood.”

“Yes, she used her magic on the way up here.” Lexa says quietly.

I glance over at Melissa who is looking at me mortified from her place by the fire.

Miss Q runs her hands through the fur on her face. “Well, it would seem you have your answer.” She looks at me and says, “Claire, I am glad you survived the ordeal.”

My cheeks heat and I mumble, “Thank you.”

“Miss Q,” Lexa says tentatively. “I apologise for my words being sharp.”

Miss Q waves her hand. “Already forgotten.” With that, she leaves the dancing light without another word.

Edward slinks back and says, “Well, that was fun.”

“Indeed,” Lexa replies with a sigh, tension evident in the position of her shoulders.

“I will send Leonardo up to you. Expect him shortly,” Edward chirps and waves enthusiastically as the dancing light fades and disappears completely into the three white crystals once more.

I rub my thumb across the back of Lexa’s hand as she sits silently for a while doing some measured breathing.

Melissa comes over and presents me with another cup of tea, all her usual swagger gone. "Claire, I honestly had no idea."

I smile at her and take the tea, making a point not to glance at the half full one I still have beside me. "I am glad you are better, Melissa."

Lexa clears her throat. "Melissa, I believe we are in need of some more spiders for our next meal. Could you please collect some for us?" Melissa's face brightens and Lexa adds, "You only need take someone if you wish."

Melissa's smile is absolutely radiant, and she looks up at Tash. "Wanna come hunt some creepy crawlies?"

Tash rises to her feet and sets aside the cut-up mushrooms she had been working on. "That depends. Am I the bait?"

Melissa grins and hold her hands in the air. "I can't help it if the spiders view your small stature as one of easy prey."

Tash sighs and picks up one of the discarded sandy torches and tests its swing. "Okay. But you have to put them in the bag."

Melissa winks all her usual confidence returned in force. "Deal."

The pair leave the cave and head into the dim cavern. Melissa with a bounce in her step and Tash still practicing her spider clubbing swing.

"Are you okay?" I ask Lexa.

She nods and stretches her legs out in front of her.

"You were hard on Melissa earlier," I say gently.

Lexa takes her hand from mine and rubs her legs somewhat forcefully. "Sometimes the position I am in means I need to make decisions I would not make if I only needed to consider my personal relationships."

I take a sip from my tea. "It must be hard."

Lexa quirks an eyebrow and her green eyes meet mine. "At all times I must be the leader I am expected to be and Lexa. Unfortunately, the latter doesn't often get much of a say."

I take her hand. "Well, when you are with me you can just be Lexa." She gives me a brilliant smile and squeezes my hand.

Lucas moves into view carrying the mushrooms over to the fire and begins placing them on the hot rock there. He closes his eyes and once again summons the little purple tentacle to turn the roasting fungi. I watch with interest, and it strikes me that the bumps on the tentacle are actually little leaves.

“It is remarkable that he can do that,” Whispers Lexa. “Then again, Lucas has always been an incredibly fast learner.”

A loud crack echoes through our little cave and near the entrance stands a beautiful butter yellow goblin. I jump to my feet and draw my sword. Lexa mimics my actions beside me as the goblin raises his hands to show he is unarmed.

“Edward sent me.” He bows slightly and continues in a deep smooth voice. “I am Leonardo.”

I slowly lower my sword, but I don’t sheath it. “Prove it.”

He blinks at me with large astounding blue eyes. “I am going to reach into my jacket.”

Lexa shifts beside me and says, “Slowly.”

Leonardo reaches into his jacket and pulls out the jar Edward had been waving around during our crystal chat. “This is for you, Clarissa made it.”

“You are a goblin.” Nathaniel accuses. “How do we know you didn’t kill him and take it?”

Leonardo shrugs. “I am half goblin and I prefer to be thought of as human. I did not take it from Edward, he gave it to me.”

I look over the goblin in front of us, he is fully and decently clothed, significantly taller than most goblins and even his snout is more in proportion to his face. He looks almost like a yellow human. However, it is his magnificent blue eyes that really hold your attention.

“I can see you are on edge,” he says as he places the paste on a rock and steps away from it.

Lucas darts forward and takes the jar. He opens it and inspects to contents. “It is the healing paste.”

“We cannot trust him, he is a goblin,” Nathaniel insists.

Leonardo frowns. “I cannot change the circumstances of my birth or to whom I was born. However, I do want to make it clear,” he says pausing to straighten his impeccable crimson jacket. “Those things do not define who I am or how I choose to behave.”

I turn to Lexa who is considering the goblin in front of her. She sheaths her sword and says, “Leonardo, thank you for bringing this to us, will you join us for a meal?”

Leonardo smiles and I realise his teeth aren’t sharp, they are perfectly human. “I would love to.”

I sheath my sword. After a look from Lexa, Nathaniel also returns his to his scabbard. Although, the movement is rather more forceful than necessary.

Leonardo comes to the fire and with Lexa's insistence sits perched on a rock nearby. I am still wary, my past experiences with goblins have never been filled with positivity, however everything about Leonardo seems different, from his almost human appearance to his luxurious and well-fitting cloths.

With a start I realise he has hair almost as yellow as his skin and it is pulled back in a neat bun at the top of his head. His clothes are smooth and unwrinkled, in a three-piece suit of sorts. The dark red ties the whole thing in nicely with his skin colour. I study his only slightly pointed ears and his mixed features. In some ways he is quite beautiful.

"Would you like tea?" Lexa enquires.

"Oh, that would be lovely," he replies in his deep voice as he fishes a cup out of a small shoulder bag.

Nathaniel comes and sits directly across from Leonardo staring at him with an intensity that could make a rock wall cave in on itself. Leonardo seems completely oblivious to Nathaniel's hostility.

"So, Leonardo, how do you know Edward?" I ask interrupting the awkward silence.

Leonardo smiles. "Ah. Well, we met shortly after he escaped from the palace, he helped me through a particularly sticky situation, and we have been friends since."

"Edward is from the palace?" I ask trying to hide the shock I feel in my chest.

"Mmm," Is Leonardo's reply. He leans forward and takes his cup from Lexa. "Thank you."

I wait, but he doesn't offer anymore. Lexa comes to sit beside me and the smell of something burning fills the air.

"Shit!" says Lucas jumping to his feet.

He races to the cooking stone and looks in despair at the burning mushrooms there. He struggles for a moment unsure what to do, Lucas had been using his magic to turn the food. We hadn't bothered to put together any tools as an alternative.

Leonardo watches his struggle with a small smile. "Just use your magic, I have already seen it and even if I hadn't it is practically oozing

from the three of you,” he says gesturing to us.

Lucas looks at Lexa and twists his hands. Lexa nods and Lucas summons his tentacle and uses it to remove the blackened fungi from the fire. A long violet wound opens up on his wrist as the tentacle continues its work.

“I don’t know if we can still eat this,” Lucas whines poking at the shrived vegetables.

Nathanial leans over and grabs one of the burnt mushrooms from the pile and places it in his mouth. I swear I can hear it crunch from here.

Nathanial waves his hand. “It’s fine.”

Lucas stares at him, his mouth agape and looks back at the blackened crisps in the pile in front of him. “Even if it is edible,” he says. “Surely the nutritional value is gone.”

I look back towards Leonardo who is grinning at their interaction.

“Can you really feel magic?” I ask.

He sips his tea and nods. “It is something I can do. I can also sense the type of magic being used.”

I raise an eyebrow and he smiles and turns to Lucas. “For instance, if you were to give that little vine there a simple instruction it could do the action without your constant concentration and with much less magic.”

“How simple?” Lucas asks leaning forward.

Leonardo slaps his hand on his thigh. “Oh, you are new to this aren’t you?” Without waiting for an answer, he remarks. “No more than two steps, at first. As you gain more experience, more complex instructions can be given.”

Lucas frowns and closes his eyes for a minute, the tentacle waving by the fire picks up a small rock and begins dragging it in a circle in the sand. Lucas looks at it with a smile as it repeats the action on loop. He looks down at his hands and a small violet wound opens up there. It is almost the size of a needle point, the only thing giving it away is the bright purple light pouring from it.

Leonardo grins. “There you have it.”

Lucas grins back at him and summons a second tentacle and it works on trying to steal the rock from the first. “Thank you, this is much easier.”

Lexa shifts to face Leonardo. “Does all magic work this way?”

He considers her question for a moment. “Most magic works this way. Most magics are simple and require only simple instructions and

understanding. However, some magics are complex and can only be controlled adequately with complex understanding.”

“What are examples of complex and simple magic?” I ask.

Leonardo scratches his chin. “Simple magic is where things are summoned, like this little vine here.” He says gesturing to the tentacles fighting over a rock at Lucas’s feet. Leonardo takes a sip of his tea before continuing, “Complex magics are where magic is used as a group effort, known as combined magic. It is also where a magic does more than one thing at a time, like magic that heals or brings life.”

I swallow. Of course, I get the hard one.

“What do you mean when you say magic that does more than one thing?” I ask.

“Well, if a magic can be used to hold something up like this cup,” he says holding it in the air. “And then also heat the water within it, that is complex magic because the magic is doing more than one kind of thing.” He pauses. “Does that make sense?”

“How do you know so much about magic?” Nathaniel questions in a harsh disbelieving tone.

Leonardo raises an eyebrow and sits back studying Nathaniel. “Before I escaped the palace, it was my job to teach others to use magic.” He pauses. “What did you say your name was?”

Nathaniel crosses his arms. “I didn’t.” Lexa raises an eyebrow at him, and he grunts. “Nathaniel.”

“Nathaniel?” Leonardo repeats looking at Nathaniel like suddenly something has become very clear.

There is a moment where a flicker of uncertainty passes through Nathaniel’s eyes. Or is it fear?

Nathaniel rises to his feet suddenly. “I will go see if Tash and Melissa need any help.” Without another word he strides from the cave.

“Don’t mind him,” Lucas says. “He is often like that.”

Leonardo looks at Nathaniel’s retreating form. “I am not surprised.”

“Can you answer some more questions about magic?” I ask.

Leonardo pulls a small circular device from his pocket and checks it. “Of course. Although, I only have a little time before I must, regrettably, be somewhere else.”

“How do you control complex and combined magic?”

“Well,” he says straightening his jacket of invisible wrinkles. “Combined magic requires all involved to have control over their simple individual magics and it requires one to effectively take charge. The other magics in the group compliment the leaders. It is important to understand that not all magics can be used in combination. But if you have magics that do, and individuals who can control their simple magic it can, with practice, be controlled.”

I sit back. “So, with combined magic, if one person doesn’t have control everyone suffers?”

“Mmm.” Is Leonardo’s reply.

Despair settles in my stomach. “How would one control healing magic or lifegiving magic?”

Leonardo pauses for a moment. “It is difficult to say, only a hand full of people have ever been recorded using this type of magic.” He pauses for a long moment and says, “I believe an understanding of what the healing magic is being applied to would help. Medical knowledge would be of immense benefit in that situation.”

“So clearly thinking about the thing you are trying to heal?” I ask.

Leonardo shakes his head. “Yes, and no. That is a very broad way to think of it and magic needs clear specific instructions that are simple whenever possible. The way a cut is healed is not the same way a broken bone heals.”

I sit back for a moment and consider his words. “So, it would be best to think not only that it needs to be healed but how?” Leonardo nods and I continue, “Like a cut should be closed with sutures or a bone should be realigned and fused?”

“Exactly.” Leonardo replies. “However, even though breaking it down like this will give more control of healing magic, it won’t reduce the cost significantly. It will stop the wielder from accidentally healing every ailment a patient has though. Which in of itself is helpful.” He downs the rest of his tea and adds, “Healing magic requires so many different working components that it is arguably the hardest to control without significant or life ending consequences for the user.”

I sit back and Lexa takes my hand, rubbing her thumb across the back of it. My stomach twists and a prickle at the back of my throat makes me swallow.

Leonardo frowns. “This was not the answer you were hoping for.”

Lexa smiles at him. "You have been incredibly helpful Leonardo."

"I am happy to provide help wherever I can. It is hard to give clear answers when I don't know specifics. I do not know the mission you are on. Only that it has once again brought hope to the many people you have come into contact with." Leonardo says carefully.

Lexa goes to speak but he raises his hand. "I do not wish to know more detail. I am highly sort after and constantly on the move, my knowledge of your mission could be dangerous, and the emperor has many ways of extracting this kind of information from captives." He sighs and places his cup back in his bag saying, "In the event of my capture, I cannot tell them what I don't know."

Lexa nods and Leonardo checks the circular device in his pocket once more. "I must go," he declares rising to his feet.

Lucas looks up at him with a guilty smile. "Sorry you didn't get to eat with us," he says gesturing to the charcoaled mushrooms.

Leonardo smiles and waves a hand. "Don't think on it." He turns to Lexa and myself with a small bow. "Farewell."

With a loud crack he disappears, and we are left staring at the empty space he occupied only moments ago.

"What a strange fellow," I say.

"I have never seen a goblin human hybrid," Lucas remarks as he picks through the burnt mushrooms looking for anything salvageable.

"I have," I say. "He is completely different from the others."

"You have seen other hybrids?" Lexa enquires. "What are they like?"

I nod. "I have seen a few." I pause for a moment and think for the common qualities among them before saying, "they are all quite tall, some of them towering over humans. Usually they are very muscled, cruel beyond measure, and possess a frightening intelligence. Most of them hold high ranking positions."

She nods and stares into the fire.

"Have you ever met one like Leonardo?" Lucas asks.

I shake my head. "No, I have never been to the palace though."

"It is hard to imagine friendly hybrids like Leonardo would be useful to Darkmor," Lexa says quietly.

I shrug. "Leonardo seems smart. Smart enough to know how to stay alive in a place like that."

Nathanial, Melissa, and Tash walk in covered in dust and Tash pulls a twig from her hair. Melissa grins and holds the bag up triumphantly. “Who wants to eat something with a bunch of legs?”

Chapter Eight

“He is still a goblin,” Nathaniel insists.

I meet Nathaniel’s eyes. “Half. He is half goblin.”

“It doesn’t matter what Leonardo is as long as he is a friend,” Lexa cuts in with a clear voice as the tension between Nathaniel and myself threatens to escalate.

Melissa and Tash stare between the two of us, cooked spiders held limply in their hands. Lucas sits beside them and rips a chunk off his spider chewing happily.

“So,” Melissa says. “There was a goblin hybrid here and he taught you how to use magic?”

“And he didn’t try to eat anyone?” Tash adds.

Lucas holds up his fingers and wriggles them. “We still have all our limbs.”

Tash nods. “Did he help?”

Lucas smiles brightly and closes his eyes. Two little tentacles appear at his feet and begin feeding small sticks to the fire. A small wound opens on his cheek and neck, but like last time, they are no bigger than a pin prick, only the violet purple light makes the injuries noticeable.

Melissa claps and pulls one of her many knives from her belt. “Make them throw knives next.”

“Lucas,” Lexa cuts in. “Please don’t do that. Your control has increased exponentially. But I do not wish for knives to be flung around for no reason. It creates unnecessary risk.”

Melissa looks crushed and Lucas gives Lexa a grin and a nod.

Tash pokes me in the leg. “Did it help you?”

The smile on my face falls and I let out a small sigh. “Apparently, only minor changes can be made to the consequences of my type of magic. Although, he did point out how I could use focus to only intentionally heal, instead of just the all-in healing I have been doing.”

“Well, that’s good,” Melissa says. “You were probably hurt so bad last time because you were healing everything. Maybe this focus will make a bigger difference than you think.”

I smile at her, and Lexa rubs her hand on my lower back. I turn to Lexa and ask, “What type of magic do you think you have?”

Lexa pauses and captures her bottom lip in her teeth as she thinks. “I believe it is possible my magic does a few things. I cannot be certain though.”

“Sure, you can,” says Tash passing her largely uneaten spider to Nathaniel who had finished his in minutes and is obviously still hungry. They smile at each other with love heart eyes for a moment before Tash continues, “When you use your magic with Claire, you create that invisible bubble thing and you zap stuff.”

“Combined magic has different properties,” Lexa says staring into the fire. “It is possible those abilities are Claire’s magic working together with mine.”

“You could try now,” Lucas remarks, his two little tentacles waving aimlessly at his feet having run out of twigs to add to the fire.

“How do you use your magic without being connected to Claire?” Lexa asks.

Lucas scratches his chin. “Well, I just thought about the things my magic did with Claire’s and tried to do it again. It took me a few tries to find which of the magics was mine alone, so if something doesn’t work try another.”

Lexa nods and removes her hand from my back to dig in her pocket. She drapes the necklace around her neck and closes her eyes. For a long while nothing happens. I watch Lexa for a long time, so long that my eyes go blurry. I rub them and look back at Lexa and realise she is the only thing that is blurry, almost transparent. I hold back my desire to call out to her, not wanting to interrupt her process and as I watch, she disappears completely.

“Lexa?” I say tentatively to the spot where she had been.

“I am still here,” comes Lexa’s disembodied voice.

I check my necklace is in my pocket and hesitantly reach out towards Lexa. My hand comes into contact with her knee and suddenly I can see her, a fuzzy green line surrounding her. She grins at me, a wild excitement in her eyes.

“Guys?” comes Tash’s worried voice.

Nathaniel leans forward and squints at us. Rubbing the stubble of his chin with his hand.

Lucas slaps his hand on his leg. "Oh, that is so cool."

Melissa snickers. "I know how Tash and Nathaniel would use that gift." Tash smacks her in the arm.

I look at Lexa with a frown. "What are they on about?"

"Hey, just because we can't see you doesn't mean we can't hear you," Melissa says with a grin.

I almost jump. "You can't see us?"

"No. We can hear you, but we cannot see you." Lucas replies.

I look at Lexa who is grinning at me. The usually guarded woman is unable to hide her excitement at this latest development in her abilities. As I watch, a green speck opens under Lexa's eyebrow and I realise she has one on her hand as well.

"Can you do anything else?" I ask, thinking about the complex magic Leonardo had mentioned.

Lexa closes her eyes and I shamelessly study her features, my usual hesitations washed away by the fact that I cannot be seen doing it. A green shimmer runs along Lexa, like small ribbons of fine light weaving its way over her skin. Suddenly it all bunches together and shoots out at a rock nearby, the whole thing flashes bright green and a loud crack echoes throughout the space. The rock is now marred by a black line that has burnt a path through the surface.

"She can shoot light at stuff and be invisible," Lucas says with a mixture of excitement and sadness.

Melissa leans over and pats his leg. "But you have super cool tentacles, I think your power is pretty awesome." Lucas flashes her a smile.

I glance back at Lexa to find her staring at me, a small green line on her neck. The way she is looking at me sends a wave of heat up my spine and I swallow.

"Hey," comes Melissa's voice as it cuts through the moment and drags us back to reality. "Are you two ever going to come out of there?"

Lexa's smile fades and she closes her eyes.

"Finally!" grumps Nathaniel. "I was starting to wonder if you were stuck invisible."

Lexa raises an eyebrow but says nothing.

Lucas nods seriously. "The first time I summoned my tentacle alone, I couldn't figure out how to get rid of it."

“Really?” Asks Tash.

“Yeah, then Otis came along, and I had to stuff it in my bag,” Lucas admits. “The damn thing wriggled the whole time it was in there and kept pinching my back.”

Tash giggles and Melissa grins.

“You have been able to use your power independently since Travellers Haven?” Lexa asks.

Lucas holds his hands up in the air and changes the balance between them. “Yes and no. At first, I had a lot of trouble turning it on, then turning it off. Then making it do something on purpose was a whole new problem,” he says. “The first time I have really been able to make it work was after the bats.”

Nathanial grunts and crosses his arms as Tash pulls out the little wooden box we had found in the horrifying bat tunnels on the way up here and turns it in her hands. After everything that had happened, I forgot we had stumbled across it.

Lucas raises his eyebrows and removes his glasses to wipe them. “When did you get that?”

“We found it on the way up here,” Melissa answers. “You were pretty out of it and must have missed it.”

“It’s a waste of time, trying to get into that thing,” Nathanial rumbles. “It wouldn’t surprise me if it was a solid lump of wood carved to look like it opens.”

Tash turns the small box in her hands. “The note said it would open for the owner. It is probably magic of some sort.”

“Can I look?” asks Lucas.

Tash hands it to him and he begins working on prying it open with various tools from his belt and bag.

“Claire, are you feeling improved?” Lexa asks gently as Melissa, Tash, and Lucas squabble over whether or not explosives should be attempted on the box.

I smile at her. “I think so. Some areas are still sore, but I am ready to travel again if that is what you are asking.”

Lexa nods and pulls the healing cream out of a bag nearby. “Now that we have more of this cream, we should apply them to the worst of your magical wounds.”

“We should save it,” I say pushing the offered container away.

“Claire you are in pain.”

“I am fine.” I insist.

Lexa raises her eyebrow and asks, “What if you are forced to use your magic again soon? Will you be fine then?”

I narrow my eyes at her and can’t help the small smile that lifts the corner of my mouth. Well, she expertly manoeuvred me into a corner with that comment. I sigh and take the cream, grinning at her in earnest. “You win this round.”

Lexa smiles back. “Claire, whenever your health and wellbeing are the focus, I shall endeavour to win every round.” I stop and stare at her. Lexa sighs taking the cream from my hand and unscrewing the lid. “Claire, you care deeply for others and not enough for yourself. I wish you could understand how much you matter.”

Suddenly lost for words, I stare at Lexa for a moment before I realise she is holding the open jar in her hands and is waiting. I turn around and lift the back of my shirt so Lexa can apply the cream to the magical wounds there.

“Lexa,” comes Tash’s voice from the other side of the fire. “Do you know where the box we found at the scary rock face thingy is?”

Lexa pauses for a moment. No doubt attempting to translate ‘scary rock face thingy’. She resumes putting the cream on my back and says, “If you are referring to the box we found after Claire and I were kidnapped by the goblins, I believe it is in my backpack. Feel free to search it.”

Tash eagerly digs through Lexa’s backpack and retrieves the box, disappointment etched onto her face. “Damn, they are different,” she says.

“Told you,” Replies Melissa.

Tash holds the chocolate brown box in her hand and Melissa lifts her sandy coloured box in hers. Melissa reaches out her hand and Tash passes her the box and together they inspect them.

Lucas crosses his arms. “I’m sure I can get in them with explosives.”

Tash sighs. “Lucas, I have no doubt you can get in them with explosives, the problem is we want what is inside the box to be recoverable.”

Lexa finishes applying the healing paste to my wounds, and I lower my shirt. “Thank you,” I say to Lexa.

She nods and returns the paste to her bag. She turns to the group, intent on their deep discussion and cuts in. “I think we should resume our

travels tomorrow morning. Does anyone have an objection or alteration to this plan?"

"Nope," replies Lucas. The group nods at his comment.

"Alright, we will leave tomorrow morning. Try to get some rest. This cave has been a reprieve from danger that I cannot guarantee will continue once we depart."

"Thank you for your concern," Lucas replies in an oddly serious voice. "But I assure you, I keep my screaming practice up to date and I am prepared to do it at a moment's notice."

A smile creeps on to my face and Melissa launches into a fit of almost silent laughter beside him.

The corner of Lexa's mouth lifts. "Thank you for your assurances, Lucas."

"Anytime."

I yawn and my eye lids prickle. A belly full of well-cooked spider and with the healing cream soothing the worst of my magical wounds, my body is screaming for a rest. I lay down and stare at the fire until I fall asleep.

The next morning, we are all bunched together at the cave entrance staring out at the sandy expanse in front of us. It is weird how flat the top of this mountain is, almost like someone cut the top off with a giant knife and left only the large chunks of roof and rocky out crops here are there as compensation for the loss. The top of the mountain is so large that we cannot see to the edges.

"Well," Melissa says peering around us. "My best guess would be to go towards the middle."

Lexa nods. "I agree, until we see some signs of habitation it is the best course of action."

"Yes, that and we don't want to wander into anymore bat colonies," Lucas adds with obvious distaste.

With that we move forward and amble along the sand in a direction we have labelled the 'middle.' I shuffle forward and move to walk with Tash and Melissa who are still trying to find ways inside the boxes.

"Can I look?" I ask.

Tash nods and passes me the chocolate covered box. I turn the box in my hands and run my fingers along the smooth edges. It must be very old,

the wood is so smooth it almost feels soft under my skin.

“Wasn’t there a note with each of these boxes?” I ask turning it over. “Maybe the note is the key to getting in them?”

Lexa fishes the note out of her bag and unfolds the fragile paper and reads, “When six become one, I come undone.”

Lucas snorts. “How is the box supposed to know when six become one?”

I shrug. “Maybe it is magic? Or maybe what ever is inside the box is magic and is keeping it locked until six become one?”

“Tash takes the box back. “Well, if it is sealed with magic, I doubt we will be able to pry it open with tools or any kind of force.”

Lexa carefully tucks the note back in her bag. “It would seem we need to solve the riddle and action it before we will be granted access.”

I nod and scuff the sand with my feet as I walk. “What about the note from the other box?”

“Oooh, I have that one,” Tash announces and fishes the note out of her bag.

She passes it to me, and I take the note and read, “One is real, and one is not, I used to know, but I forgot. Choose now wisely for you will see, you could end up just like me. I am a Keeper of things once lost, but only its owner can look inside my box.”

“That one seems easier, we just need to find the owner.” says Melissa who suddenly flings a knife into the sand in front of us. I do a double take as I realise the knife is embedded in a huge snake head. Melissa stoops to pick up the snake and stuffs it in her bag for later.

“What if that is venomous?” I ask.

Melissa tosses her bag back over her shoulder. “If you cut the head off it and avoid any glands it will be fine to eat, even if it is venomous.”

“You think there is a gem in the box?” Lucas asks, skipping over the suddenly impaled snake and the entire conversation that followed as if it never happened.

Melissa nods. “It kinda says so.”

“I am inclined to agree with Melissa,” Lexa adds.

“I think it’s designed to waste time,” grunts Nathaniel. “I bet that blasted box has nothing in it and isn’t worth the space it takes up.”

The conversation dies down and Tash stores the box safely inside her pack once more. In the distance a great bolt of yellow light erupts into the

sky followed by an enormous bang. We all crouch in the sand as the wind stirs up around us but nothing else happens.

“That is what I saw from the ground,” I say rising to my feet. “Before we met the vermailan.”

“Well, at least we know we are going the right way.” Lucas remarks, his voice cracking slightly.

Chapter Nine

I shuffle through the soft sand as it swallows a chunk of my boot with every step. I squint into the distance looking for a place to stop for the night, we have been walking for ages and no form of protective shelter has been found. At this rate, we will need to sleep out in the open. Which is not ideal. Our wandering had taken us dangerously close to the edge at one point and we had to detour around it.

“How far do you think we need to be away from the edge to stop the bats from thinking we are a worthwhile meal?” Lucas asks wringing his hands.

“I don’t know,” Melissa replies. “Some bats travel very far for food every day, but I have never encountered vampiric bats before. They might be different.”

“They didn’t bother us at the last cave.” I say as I fish the water canteen out of my bag and take a sip. I shake the alarmingly low container and frown as I put it back in my bag. We will need to find more soon, or we will be in big trouble.

“We travelled a really long way to find the last cave,” Lucas replies, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Almost half a day.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I didn’t know that.”

“It is hard to know things when you are unconscious,” Tash unhelpfully supplies as she climbs over a fallen chunk of roof behind Nathaniel.

I follow her over the enormous rock and slide down it into the crunchy sand below. I have a feeling this walk would have been faster if we didn’t have to keep finding ways around the fallen roof. Already we have had to make a pretty big detour around a rock so huge it could have been a small mountain. I suppose if we find nothing more suitable, we could potentially use one of these fallen rocks as some form of protective shelter.

We return to silence as we walk along the crunchy sand. A beetle buzzes past my face and I swat it away. The bugs in this area are unbelievable. I suspect if we needed to, we could find enough bugs to

sustain us for some time. I shudder at the thought. I really hope it doesn't come to that.

"What is that?" Melissa asks pointing in the distance and breaking the silence.

I squint and stare in that direction. All I see is sand, large sections of flat rock, and small scrubby plants in every direction. "I don't see anything."

Lexa is looking in that direction as well. "The boulder?"

I squint back in the direction Melissa had indicated and now that I really focus, there is a lumpy thing there. It could be a boulder.

"Yes. It looks to be large and if the base is made of this stuff," she says scuffing at the rocky sand with her feet. "We could gain protection for three angles, if we dig around the bottom of the boulder a little," Melissa remarks.

"It might make a good temporary shelter," Lexa agrees.

We head towards it and stumble upon a path of sorts, small rocks line the sides, and it looks like it has been well travelled, the sand underneath crushed until it is almost white. We haven't seen anything remotely like a path since the bat labyrinth. I eye the path with suspicion.

"What are the chances guards are still up here?" I ask toeing the white path with the edge of my boot.

Nathanial shrugs. "It wouldn't make sense to leave guards up here full time. They would be hard to feed and if left to their own devices they can become a problem."

"That and I don't think any more are coming up that mountain pass anytime soon," Tash adds.

Lucas boldly steps onto the path. "If there are some stuck up here, we are bound to run into them eventually. I would rather not be exhausted from walking over loose sand and rocks if we do run into them."

We pile on the path and soon it becomes obvious it is leading to the boulder Melissa and Lexa saw earlier. I can only just now make it out properly, Melissa and Lexa must have excellent vision to see so far with so much clarity. As we approach, I can see the mess strewn around the boulder. It would seem we are not the first to make use of this.

Lexa draws her sword. "Approach with caution."

We draw our weapons and make for the boulder, spreading out to maximise our coverage. As I near, I can see stacks of spindly bramble

wood at the back packed in the overhang the huge rock creates. Two makeshift barriers made of hides are stretched along the sides bound tightly to poles buried deep in the ground. It is a clever way to block out the wind.

Trash is everywhere, bones, bits of cloth, broken shoes and small blackened patches where fires have been. It could only be the guards. The mess here could certainly be created by a group of that size. We work our way silently through the mess while Nathaniel and Melissa circle around the back of the boulder.

I pick through the debris and look behind one of the hide barriers. Nothing but sand and the side of the boulder. I turn to nod at Lexa who is checking the other side.

“Clear here,” yells Melissa.

“We are clear here as well,” Lexa replies.

We all sheath our weapons, and a growl comes from above us. My heart flies into my chest and I look up. At the top of the boulder, crouched and menacing sits a large scaly beast, easily bigger than two Nathaniels. Its vibrant orange scales glint as it lets out another billowing growl. Small clouds of green gas pour from its mouth and large leathery, yellow wings unfold.

I grip the hilt of my sword. “Is that a—?”

My words are cut off as I am brutally tackled to the ground. A burst of scorching heat blasts past, incinerating the pile of blankets I had been standing on only moments before.

“Dragon!” Lexa yells from above me.

The dragon lets out an ear-splitting bellow that has the pebbles on the ground near my face vibrating. The beast leaps from the top of the boulder and lands with a thud beside us. I eye the massive feet and the long black dagger length claws protruding from each toe.

Lexa scrambles to get off me when a deep rumble comes from the dragon. “Stop,” it commands.

Lexa freezes, both legs straddling my waist as we both stare at the horned dragon who is staring intently at Lexa. I push at Lexa’s thighs, but she doesn’t move a muscle. She just continues to sit there and stare back at the dragon.

“Lexa, what is going on?” I ask trying to wriggle out from under her. “We can’t just sit here, there is a bloody dragon.”

“Oh no!” Tash calls out from the far side the dragon. “Lexa has made eye contact with the dragon.”

The dragons tail swishes violently and hits the boulder with so much force that little chips of stone explode in every direction.

“You have to break their eye contact Claire,” Melissa yells. “Before it is too late.”

“She is mine,” The dragon rumbles crouching down, so it is closer to Lexa’s level, revealing small sharp red spines along its neck.

“Like hell she is,” screams Melissa.

I don’t know what she does, but the dragon lets out a wail and thrashes its tail again. Nathaniel bellows and charges at the dragon, his huge double handed sword raised in the air. The dragon swipes a foreclaw at him, batting him to the ground without turning its head, refusing to break eye contact with Lexa.

I turn to Lexa as the group begins an all-out attack on the dragon and grasp her thighs. “Lexa, look at me.”

A muscle in her jaw twitches but nothing else, not even a blink. I try to wriggle out from under her, the loose sand makes it hard to get a good grip with my feet and her leg muscles are so rigid around my waist I can’t get my hips through. The fight beside us is moving dangerously close. I chance a glance just as the dragon opens a wing and uses it to knock Lucas to the ground. He is knocked a fair distance and lands with a violent thud.

I turn back to Lexa, who hasn’t moved even slightly as the battle rages beside us. I grip her hip and flip her, so her back is to the soft sand, her hair loose from her braid spreads about her head.

She blinks and turns to me, her legs tightening around my waist. We lock eyes, and she opens her mouth and says, “Clai–.”

“Look at me!” The dragon bellows cutting Lexa off and her head snaps around to meet its gaze once more.

My neck tingles as my muscles twitch in response to the command, the pull to obey is almost overwhelming. I shake my head trying to dislodge the impulse and dig into my secret pocket grasping the sapphire necklace in my hand. The moment the cool gem makes contact with my skin I grasp Lexa’s hand and green and blue light erupts around us.

“Nice trick.” The dragon rumbles in amusement and I am sure the noise comes from inside my head this time. “But it only makes her blurry. She will be mine.”

I grab Lexa's head and struggle to turn her gaze from the beasts, the gem cuts into the palm of my hand painfully as I fight to turn her head away from the dragon's gaze. The struggle is real, but finally she is looking at me, a green line on her neck from the use of our magic.

"Claire, I cannot fight it," Lexa stammers, sweat breaking out on her skin. "It is so strong."

I grip both sides of her head and think about closing the connection the dragon has made, trying to direct my magic the way Leonardo had suggested. Pain sears across my shoulder and Lexa begins to relax under me. Her breathing becomes less laboured and strong hands grip my forearms.

"What are you doing?" The dragon rages its voice rattling around inside my head. "I said she is mine!"

Lexa struggles to turn her head once more and I focus intently on her, looking for the place in her mind where the beast holds their connection.

"Look at me Lexa." I plead, gripping her face tightly as her head tries to turn towards the dragon. "Just look at me," I whisper.

Her bright green eyes lock with mine and she gives the slightest nod. I smile even as burning pain runs the length of my thigh. "Well done, just keep looking at me."

Lexa's breathing is heavy, but I no longer have to fight to keep her face pointed towards me. Sudden pain pierces my skull and spots fill my vision.

"I WILL HAVE HER!" The fiery voice of the dragon rages through my head.

I close my eyes and focus on the voice with all the strength I have in me. "She is not yours," I snarl back.

The fire inside my head recoils a little before flaring back with a greater intensity than before. The force of it brings me to my elbows and strong hands grip painfully at my waist. I focus back in on fire rampaging through my head and push back at it with all the force I can muster.

"ENOUGH!" The voice thunders inside my head. "I tire of these games, and I *will* take what is mine."

Something snaps inside me, and I look directly at the beast locking with those bright purple eyes. "She is mine!" I practically scream back at it.

It pushes at my mind, and I push back. It pushes again and I push back harder. This time the dragon physically recoils.

“HOW!?” It demands, confusion and fear lacing its thundering voice.

I spot Lucas’s tentacles creeping along the legs of the dragon. Getting ready to spring tight and hold it down at a moment’s notice. I take in Nathaniel unconscious and Tash by his side, blood on her face. Melissa stands guard over Lucas who is intently focused on his task.

The dragon stands still amidst all this destruction ignoring them, completely focused on me and Lexa.

“HOW!” The dragon demands once more.

The blast of the word hits me like a physical blow. I groan and focus on Lexa, who is fighting to turn her head once more. I muster the last of my strength and push all my magic into the connection the dragon has with Lexa, and I imagine cutting the thread with a sword. Lexa completely relaxes under me and takes in a huge breath. I glance at the dragon, who stumbles and is immediately encased by Lucas’s purple tentacles.

The dragon bellows and turns its head to face him, finally realising the threat it had created by ignoring the rest of our group, but as it does a purple tentacle wraps itself firmly around the dragon’s head, completely covering its eyes and muzzling the snout.

“Claire,” Lexa says from under me.

I turn to look at her and I smile to see her completely in control of herself once more. Pain burns through the back of my neck and remembering our magic is activated, I let go of my necklace and leave it on the ground beside my hands. Too tired to move any further.

The magic around us disappears and Lexa’s arms snake around my waist pulling me in. I drop my weight onto her shoulder and regain my breath. Exhausted from my ordeal with the dragon.

“Thank you, Claire,” Lexa says, her breath tickling my ear. “I could not have resisted it on my own.”

I nod into her neck. “I wasn’t going to let it have you.”

“Because I’m yours?” Lexa queries and I can hear her smile from here.

Heat rises to my face, and I push up from her to look down at her grinning face as I try to find a response.

“Hey,” Comes Melissa’s amused voice from behind us. “In case you two missed it while getting all frisky in your invisible bubble, the rest of

us fought and detained a dragon.”

I drop my head back to Lexa’s shoulder and mumble, “I wanna be invisible again.”

Lexa chuckles. “Perhaps another time.” I nod and fumbling, climb off her as she gracefully rises to her feet and offers her hand. “Perhaps, we can finish our conversation then as well.”

I swallow and my heart pounds in my chest as I nod and take her hand, grabbing my necklace from the ground as I do so. Light bursts around us as she pulls me to my feet. Lexa raises an eyebrow and I stuff the necklace back in my pocket, looking sheepishly at her as the coloured light around us disappears.

We approach the dragon as it wriggles and fights its tentacle bindings. Weirdly all I hear is silence. After the mental attack from before I really didn’t expect the dragon to give up just because it is restrained. In many ways, its mind attacks are more of a threat than its physical size.

“I can’t hear it anymore,” I say.

“Me either,” adds Lexa.

Melissa nods and gestures to the dragon’s head. “I’m not surprised. Some dragons have this kind of mental magic, but it all depends on its eyes. Something about eye contact amplifies the abilities.”

“And covering its eyes solves the problem?” Tash asks helping a now conscious Nathaniel to his feet.

“I think so,” Melissa says poking the dragon’s neck. “Lexa seems better already.”

Lexa rubs her head. “I should have known better than to look it in the eyes.”

Melissa rolls her eyes dramatically. “You cannot be perfect all the time.”

“I could hear it,” I say. “But I didn’t look it in the eyes until the very end.”

“That’s weird,” Lucas replies as he checks over his magical tentacles to be sure they are tight. “Any ideas Melissa?”

Melissa shrugs and collects some of her throwing knives from the sand around the dragon. “I dunno. Maybe Claire is the dragon whisperer?”

Tash snorts and my mouth quirks into a slight smile.

“I think it was your magic,” Lexa remarks. “You didn’t start talking out loud to it until you were holding your crystal.”

My cheeks heat up again as I recall exactly what I said out loud. I glance at Lexa who is staring intently at me, and I swallow. We definitely need to finish that conversation. The dragon shifts beside us pulling me back to the present and I eye the giant, now moving only slightly in the tight magical binds.

“What do we do now?” I ask. “It is not like we can keep it detained forever.”

Melissa nods. “I don’t think we can just let it go either. Dragons are vindictive and vengeful.”

Nathanial wipes a trickle of blood from the wound on his head. “I doubt the beast will ever leave us alone if we don’t kill it.”

We all turn to look at the dragon who has paused its struggles to hear our words. The magnificent orange beast seems almost sad. I reach out to touch the orange scales on the leg closest to me. The scales are hard, and the surface is polished to a shine, but the edges are razor sharp. My hand travels carefully over a few of the scales and I realise the orange colour isn’t consistent. As I look closer, I notice the scales take on a variety of yellows and oranges.

“You really are quite beautiful,” I murmur.

“I appreciate the compliment, insignificant one.”

I jerk my hand away as the voice fills my head and it disappears. I look at the group trying to hold back the alarm raging through my chest. “Umm, when I touch the dragon, I can speak with it.”

“Really?” Lucas says with so much enthusiasm it is like I just handed him the greatest gift in the world. He eagerly touches the dragon, and the enthusiasm falls from his face. “Either I can’t hear it, or it won’t talk to me.”

I raise an eyebrow. “It spoke to me. It did call me insignificant one though.”

Melissa snorts.

I eye her as Lexa says, “Is it safe for you to converse with it? After the hold it held on me?”

I shrug. “It did try to make me do what it said earlier, but I fought it off. I think I can do it again.” Lexa looks uneasy but I place my hand on the dragon’s foreleg again. “Um, so, why did you attack us?”

“Because you attacked me you insolent whelp!” The voice thunders back.

I groan as it rages around in my head. “You attacked us,” I insist fighting off the growing headache.

The beast shifts under my hand and lets out a disbelieving huff. “You are lying! I was sleeping six moons past and one of you puny humans threw a spear at me.”

“We most certainly did not,” I repeat holding off the impulse to cross my arms.

Lexa touches my shoulder. “What is it saying?”

“It thinks we attacked it six days ago,”

“How could we?” Nathaniel grunts crossing his arms. “We were still coming up that damned mountain side six days ago.”

“You didn’t return to finish me off?” The dragon enquires.

“No,” I say. “Before you attacked us today, we didn’t even know you existed.”

The dragon is silent for a long moment. “It is possible I am mistaken. You runty humans all look alike. It is almost impossible to tell you lot apart.”

“We did not throw a spear at you.” I repeat.

The dragon hums and shifts uncomfortably. My eye catches something wedged under its leg, I crouch and look at it. It is a spear, lodged in between the pale scales of the dragon’s stomach. Deep cuts surround it where the beast had obviously tried to remove the intrusion itself.

I point at the wound. “It’s hurt.” Lucas and Lexa crouch to inspect the wound.

“It is hard to see,” Lucas says lifting his glasses to get a better look.

Lexa reaches towards the wound, gently touching the spear. “I think we could remove it. The dragon would need to cooperate though.”

“I can try to take that out if you want,” I say to the dragon.

The dragon turns its head to me the best it can as it is held down by Lucas’s magic. “You would do that? Even after I attacked you and tried to take your mate?”

My cheeks heat up and I feel the flush spread down to my chest.

“What is the reply?” Lexa asks.

My mouth is dry, and I swallow heavily. “Umm. The dragon is surprised we still want to help it after it attacked us and–.” I pause. “Tried to take Lexa.”

I turn back to the dragon. "Yes, we want to help. But you need to cooperate."

"And swear you will not harm us," Melissa adds. I throw her a questioning look. "Dragons are honourable and cannot break their word."

The dragon laughs. "Your friend is wise in our laws. I swear not to harm you or your group if you keep your word and attempt to help me."

"Taking this out might hurt," I clarify. "And you mustn't hurt us for helping."

The beast nods. "I swear not to harm you in your attempts to remove this blasted spear, even if it hurts."

I turn to the group. "It has promised to cooperate with us."

Lucas stands and says to the dragon. "I am going to loosen your bindings enough to allow you to roll onto your side. This will give us better access to the wound."

"Why not just release me?" The dragon grumps. "I gave my word."

I shake my head. "This might be extremely painful, and you may act against your word without meaning to. This way is safer for us and your honour."

"Fine." The fire inside my head snorts.

I nod to Lucas who closes his eyes and the tentacles binding the dragon loosen just a little. The enormous dragon rolls over, revealing the extent of the grizzly wound. The deep scratches around the wound are in many ways worse than the damage the spear had caused.

I move towards the wound and inspect it closely. The spear doesn't seem too deep, it is more that it has wedged between two scales, lifting one from the skin. I grimace. It very much reminds me of a lifted fingernail. It must be very painful.

I turn to Nathaniel and point at the spear. "You are probably going to be the only one strong enough to remove this. If I show you which way to pull it out, do you think you could do it?"

Nathaniel crosses his arms. "What if it changes its mind and attacks us once we remove the spear?"

"I will not," The dragons voices insists inside my head.

"The dragon assures me it won't break its word," I relay.

The breathing under my hand is laboured and I can tell the dragon is in great pain. Nathaniel stands looking between me and the dragon, unsure. Tash comes and lays a hand on his arm.

“Look at it Nathaniel,” she says gesturing at the dragon beside us. “It is suffering, and you can help.”

Nathaniel looks down at her with fondness in his eyes and finally nods. He pushes up his sleeves, revealing impressively muscled forearms. He grips the spear and I readjust him so when he tugs, the spear should come out with the least amount of damage possible.

I touch the dragon’s leg. “We are going to try and take it out now. You need to do your best to stay as still as possible.”

The dragon nods. “On with it puny human.”

I turn to Nathaniel. “Okay, now.”

Nathaniel tugs the spear with all his strength, and it pulls clean from the dragon’s body the spear tip wickedly barbed and coated in thick red blood. The dragon roars breaking free of Lucas’s magic and rushing off towards the boulder to scratch vigorously at its stomach with its back leg. A small orange scale comes off and lands with a thud on the ground, but still the dragon scratches.

Lucas closes his eyes and summons a magical tentacle under the dragon, and it begins to assist with the itching. The dragon pauses to look at the tentacle with interest before positioning itself so the tentacle can have better access to its wounds.

I send Lucas a questioning look and he says, “It is better than letting it continue to scratch at the wound with those claws.”

I turn back to the dragon who is standing very still allowing the tentacle to scratch around the wound. I approach the dragon and it turns to look at me. I notice for the first time its deep purple eyes have a double iris with the first being smaller than the second and both with a pupil.

I point at the wound. “I am just going to check it and make sure the whole spear came out.”

The dragon stands huffing before slowly lowering to the ground and rolling on to its side. I hurry to the wound and find a large shard of wood about the size of my hand mixed in with the swollen tissue. I push up my sleeves, grip it and give it a tug, but it is stuck fast. I rest my hand on the beast’s belly and position myself and try again. This time the large shard comes free. I drop the large, pointed shard in the sand and wipe my hand on my pants.

“Ahhhh. So much better,” the dragon says in my head.

I smile and start to move away but my foot catches at something on the ground and I stoop to pick it up. It is a small orange scale, about a quarter of the size of my palm. It is blunter than the ones of the dragon's legs from all the scratching and rubbing it has endured the last few days.

I hold it up to the dragon and place my hand on its leg. "I think this is yours."

The dragon who had been laying allowing Lucas's purple tentacle to scratch its tummy opens its eye. "Keep it small one as a token of my gratitude. Bring it here."

I take it to the dragon who uses a long wickedly sharp claw to pierce a small hole through the scale and scratches a circle into the middle. "I grant you permission to wear it. While you have this on, I will be able to find you should you need me."

I take the scale and hold the treasure close to my chest with one hand while keeping the other firmly connected to the dragon. "Thank you."

"I am eternally grateful for your assistance, phoenix touched, even after my accusations and so I will bestow upon your little group of runts another gift." The dragon pauses for dramatic effect. "My name is Frivora Alcatorus."

I smile and bring one hand to my chest. "My name is Claire."

The dragon bares its teeth in what I think is meant to be a smile. It is completely terrifying.

"What is happening?" Melissa asks from behind me. I turn to see the whole group has moved closer to us.

"The dragon has shared its name with us."

Melissa's jaw drops. "For real? It really just told you its name?"

I nod and correct, "Us. The dragon told us its name. It is Frivora Alcatorus."

Melissa sits down. Literally plonks to the ground like she simply cannot stand any longer. Lexa too seems completely astounded.

Lucas scratches his chin. "I thought dragons never shared their names?"

"Only in very rare circumstances," Melissa replies from the ground. "Knowing the name of a dragon takes its power over you. If you know its name, it cannot use its magic on you."

"Well, that's a good thing, right?" I insist remembering the way Frivora Alcatorus had captured Lexa so completely.

Melissa nods, silent.

“You may call me Atorus,” The dragons voice rumbles inside my head. “Yes, you and your band of puny humans will no longer be susceptible to my magic. I have made us equals.”

“Thank you Atorus,” I say giving the dragon a slight bow.

It inclines its head back at me before and closes its eyes, fully embracing the belly rub the magical tentacle Lucas summoned is providing.

I look at the group. “It just said we can call it Atorus.”

Lexa clears her throat. “Atorus, would you permit us to stay here with you until morning?”

The dragon looks at me. “You can tell your mate I said yes. There is water not far from here and you may stay under my protection tonight.”

My face heats up again. “Uhh, she isn’t– were not.”

“I have seen into your mind little one. Don’t lie to me.”

I clear my throat and turn to the group. “Atorus says yes. There is water nearby and we are under its protection tonight.”

“Great,” Lucas announces. “Melissa and I will go fill our water canteens.” He tugs at Melissa who clumsily climbs to her feet.

The fire in my brain rumbles, “Tell your glass eyed friend to leave the tentacle.”

“Lucas,” I say, and he pauses to look at me. “Atorus has asked you to leave the tentacle.”

Lucas grins. “Atorus likes belly scratches.”

I settle by the fire and watch the leaping flames dance with the shadows of the dark cavern. Night has fully settled and the cool air clings to my skin. I sit back with my balooga tea, finally able to have one now that water is no longer a problem.

Melissa is by the fire preparing the snake she had killed earlier today and pulls the skin off in one swift movement. She hangs the flesh over the flames using a bent metal tripod we had found over by the logs. The meat sizzles over the fire and Melissa bends to prepare a large scorpion she had found by the water. I eye the creature with distaste. It is very dead, but I cannot for the life of me understand what compelled Melissa to get near enough to it to decide it is edible.

Atorus lays between us and our little boulder, offering some protection from the brisk wind that has picked up but also from any predators that might be wandering around. Something would have to really want us to try and get past the enormous orange dragon.

Lexa and Tash return to settling by the fire. Lexa grabs her bag and places the carefully wrapped crystals within it.

“How is Edward?” I ask, passing her the second cup of balooga tea I had made earlier.

She takes it gratefully. “He is well. They are going to implement Tash’s suggestions about the machine and try to unlink the crystal. The plan seems promising, at worst we have made it very difficult for Darkmor’s forces to reobtain the machine, at best we may gain use of it for our purposes.”

“That is great news. Any information on the forbidden zone?” I ask before draining the last of my tea.

Lexa shakes her head. “It is difficult because of the preconceived notions everyone seems to have about the place. Edward has suggested leading a team to the forbidden zone and gathering unbiased firsthand information about the area.” She pauses and stares into her cup. “I am reluctant to go forward with the plan. Sending a team into the unknown is risky. If the stories are even remotely true, the chances of survival are not high.”

I nod. “It is a smart plan to get an idea of what is in the forbidden zone. If it is the way out, the risk a few take might save thousands.”

Lexa sighs. “I do not relish making the order.”

I take her hand and give it a squeeze. “Don’t make it an order then. Ask for volunteers, then everyone going has chosen to be there and if something does go wrong it was their decision to be there and not an order.”

Green eyes meet mine with such intensity my heart hammers in my chest. “Thank you, Claire. I shall take your advice.” With that Lexa grabs the crystals and moves a short distance away. Small lights appear and I can see Edwards face as the two launch into a conversation for leaders.

A noise to my right snaps my eyes to Atorus looking intensely at me and I swear it has raised an eyebrow. I cannot hear its thoughts, but the face says everything. I take the necklace from my pocket and grasp it in my hand.

“You certainly behave like mates, puny one,” The fire flairs in my brain. It is gentle this time, warm and not hot like my previous conversations with Atorus.

I look down at my hands. “It is not that simple.”

“Hmmm,” the flames in my brain hums. “I understand, easy and simple are not the same things. However, you should remember small one, your lives are but a raindrop in a storm. It will be over in the briefest of moments, and you runts should make each of them count. One Phoenix-touched as you are, is likely to have a briefer life than most.”

I have heard of storms, but I have never seen one. “Have you been to the surface? And why do you keep calling me Phoenix-touched?”

Atorus snorts. “I have been to the surface many times, at least before this cavern was sealed. The magic that sealed it is so great that even I cannot counter it.” Its double pupiled eyes drift to the roof of the caverns. “Recently, I have begun to consider trying again. It has been hundreds of seasons since I flew in the skies.”

“I hope you make it.”

“Me too little one.”

There is a long silence and I begin to think I am not going to get an answer to my second question. I set about preparing to make another tea.

“It has been just as long since I have encountered a Phoenix-touched, like yourself. They used to be more numerous when the god was more active.”

My head snaps up. “How does one become Phoenix-touched?”

“You, or one of your ancestors must have done something truly important to receive the direct attentions of the Phoenix god.” The fire whispers in my head.

I nod and resume making my tea. “I have recently learned that Taliah the Great was my ancestor.”

“I met the one for which you speak but that was many seasons ago. The touch in you is much stronger than the watered down contact you would have inherited.”

I stare at Atorus my mouth open. “I have never met this phoenix god before.”

The dragon rolls its eyes. “And yet, the god has met you. Your Phoenix touch is too strong to have come from the bloodline of The Great Taliah alone.”

“What do you mean?” I ask aloud forgetting to speak in my head. Melissa and Tash snap their heads up to look at me.

Atorus sighs. “You poor humans can be so stupid. I am sure you will figure it out eventually.” With that, Atorus begins licking its wounds and it is obvious the conversation is over.

“Claire are you okay?” Tash asks from the other side of the fire.

I nod. “Yes. I was talking to Atorus, and it has confused me more than I was before.”

“I have heard dragons are like that,” Melissa remarks. “They are full of infinite wisdom, but they speak in riddles and only provide part of the answer.”

I smile. “That pretty much is a detailed breakdown of the conversation I just had.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Asks Tash as she feeds the fire a few logs.

My mind jumps to Atorus insisting Lexa is my mate. But instead, I say, “Atorus said I am Phoenix touched. Atorus seems to think I have met the god before.”

“What did it say exactly?” Asks Melissa as she cuts a small chunk from the snake roasting above the flames.

“I said, ‘I hadn’t met the god’ and Atorus replied, ‘and yet the god has met you.’”

“How can the god have met you if you haven’t met it?” Tash asks.

Melissa shakes her head as she removes the cooked snake from the fire and begins cutting it into sections. “I told you. Riddles.”

“It is probably one of those things that will make a bunch of sense in hindsight.” Tash remarks taking her share of the cooked snake.

“Yeah, after it would have been helpful,” Melissa says passing me a chunk of snake on a flat rock.

I take the offered plate and smile. “Thanks.”

“Someone has to make sure you stay fed Claire. Your hanger is real,” Melissa says with a smirk.

Tash nods a serious expression on her face. “It really is a civil service.”

I try to scowl but a grin crawls on to my face despite my best efforts. Lexa settles beside me once more and I push the necklace back into my

pocket. The chance of contact with Lexa is too high to keep it in contact with my skin.

“Edward is assembling a team of volunteers now,” she says flashing me her brilliant smile.

I squeeze her leg. “That is excellent news.”

Melissa hands Lexa a chunk of cooked snake just as Nathaniel and Lucas re-enter the firelight. “Yay! Food is ready! I’m starving,” announces Lucas as he plonks down beside us. I eye the numerous violet pinpricks that dot his body. I shift so there is less pressure on the magical wound on my thigh. I should really practice with my magic.

“How did the scouting go?” Tash asks.

“Fine,” comes Nathaniel’s curt reply. I raise an eyebrow, normally Nathaniel is more talkative when it is Tash.

“You two were gone a long time,” Melissa prods.

Lucas snickers and Nathaniel throws him a filthy look. This only turns Lucas’s face into one of full-blown glee. “Nathaniel thought he saw a snake and we had to make a big detour, so we didn’t come anywhere near this serpent.”

“You’re still afraid?” Melissa asks disbelief in her voice.

“I am not!” Nathaniel insists. “It is just unwise to engage unnecessarily with predators in a dark strange place.”

Tash puts her hand on Nathaniel’s large arm. “Oh honey. It’s okay.”

Nathaniel looks at her with so much adoration to the affectionate name I almost can’t comprehend it.

Melissa clears her throat and hands him a chunk of snake. “Well big guy, eat this and relish in the knowledge you are eating the flesh of your enemies.”

Nathaniel grabs the offered plate and takes a huge defiant bite out of the snake. A large bolt of bright yellow light splits the darkness about a days walk from here. Everyone turns but the light isn’t followed by anything more.

Atorus sits up and stares into the distance. “The lightning witch,” it says out loud, it’s words ill formed and clumsy.

We wait, but the dragon offers no more. I slip my hand into my hidden pocket and ask out loud. “Do you know anything about the witch?”

The beast turns to me, and the fire ignites in my head once more. Atorus’s clear unencumbered voice floats through my head. “The lightning

witch has been around for many seasons.”

“Why do you call her lightning witch?”

The dragon turns to me surprised. “I forget you insignificant blips are so young you have never seen the sky.” Atorus realises with an audible sigh. “The light she creates is called lightning. It usually comes from the sky, it is very hot, fast and can travel far. And for puny fleshlings like yourself, very dangerous.”

“Do you have any tips for surviving this lightning?” I ask.

“Don’t be idiotic enough to go near it,” the dragon suggests. “The witch is unstable in many ways.”

“What is it saying?” Lexa asks.

I repeat the conversation and we all sit in silence as we process this new information. I fiddle with the necklace in my pocket as I think about the dragon’s words. Unstable in many ways doesn’t sound promising.

Lexa says, “This information is helpful, and I am sure will provide more clarity in the future.”

Melissa pulls the scorpion from the flames and cuts it up into sections, carefully wrapping it in cloth and placing it into her bag. I try not to grimace as I think of it as breakfast.

Lucas lays down by the fire, his many purple wounds a little duller than before. “Well, I am going to get some rest, I used a lot of magic today and I am sure I will do a lot of screaming tomorrow.”

Others start preparing for sleep too and I tug at the wrists of my shirt as I think about how my magic cost me today. I may not be able to reduce the cost of my healing magic, but I should be able to do better with the light shield magic.

Lexa lays one of our blankets on the ground and is pulling the second out of the bag when I touch her wrist gently and ask, “Lexa, could we practice making our light shield? I would very much like work on reducing the cost of my magic where I can.”

Lexa smiles. “Of course.”

Melissa shoots us a massive grin. “Of course Claire wants to practice using the invisible soundproof bubble you two make.”

My cheeks heat up and I grab my necklace from my pocket and take Lexa’s hand. I think very clearly that all I want to do is make the light bubble with Lexa. The magic erupts around us, in dancing blues and greens.

“Do you think it is working?” Lexa asks.

I shrug and turn to the group and say loudly, “Melissa, Lucas touched your favourite sharpening stone!”

Not one of them turns to face us as they talk quietly amongst themselves and prepare their blankets for sleep.

Lexa chuckles. “It is a good thing she didn’t hear you. That sentence might have insighted a riot.”

I shrug. “I wanted to be sure the magic was working.”

I feel a magical wound open on my hand and I look down at it to find it is the size of a pin prick. I cannot stop the grin that spreads across my cheeks at this small success.

I look up at Lexa who is smiling back at me. “Well done, Claire.”

My stomach lurches as I feel Lexa’s thumb start to rhythmically brush the back of my hand. I look at our hands and my heart hammers in my chest in response to the fire that burns from the skin under her thumb through the rest of my body in answer to the gentle touch.

“Is this okay?” Lexa asks gently.

I nod. Probably too enthusiastically and I feel my cheeks heat up in response. I swallow heavily and stare down at our hands, there is this weird combination of feeling within me. Desperation to see what is going to happen next, and terror. I have never been so afraid of something I wanted before and the realisation unnerves me, makes me unsure of how to proceed. Coupled with that is the knowledge that Lexa has had these kinds of relationships before and must be immensely more experienced than I am. Then again, I might be way off the mark here and a relationship might not be what Lexa wants at all.

“You are deep in thought,” Lexa says gently.

I bite my lip and nod, another pin prick of blue light opens on my arm. “It’s been a big day.”

Lexa nods. “We do seem to experience a lot of those. Is there anything you wish to discuss?”

I try very hard to focus on anything that isn’t the fire burning through my skin in response to Lexa’s touch. Which unfortunately leads me to become very focused on her lips. I watch as her tongue darts out to moisten them and our eyes lock. Lexa’s green eyes are a shade darker than normal. A thousand words float through my mind but none of them are what I want.

I don't want to talk.

With a burst of courage greater than anything I have had in my entire life, I lean in and take Lexa's lips in my own. They are unbelievably soft and a wave of adrenaline washes over me as I feel hers move on mine. Strong hands grip my waist and suddenly, I am on my back and Lexa is above me pressing down and setting my every nerve on fire. She reclaims my lips, and the kiss is hard. Our tongues fight for dominance and when she nips my lip, the moan that comes from me is anything but voluntary.

My hands slide under the hem of her shirt, and I play with the smooth skin there scratching my blunted nails along the surface. Lexa releases my mouth with a gasp and slides a thigh between mine as she roughly claims my neck, biting and sucking her way along it. My hips move of their own accord desperately seeking more contact than is presently available and I cannot stay still under her attentions. I tug her back in for another searing kiss and pull at her hips trying to bring her impossibly closer. Lexa's hands are everywhere leaving blazing trails of sensation in her wake and waves of coursing energy build in my stomach.

Another magical wound opens on my thigh, but the sensation only adds to the fire building within me, and a small whimper escapes my lips. I tug at Lexa's clothes, suddenly desperate to remove the barrier between us and Lexa pulls away and helps with the fastenings on her shirt. Finally, we get the leather armour undone and Lexa is above me in a singlet. My eyes travel to her swollen lips, her tanned chest, and well-defined collarbones. My brain might just shut down at the sight of her.

We tug at the fastenings of my armour when our shimmering bubble of magic flashes green and a small magical wound appears on Lexa's neck. She lets out a breathy gasp that makes my heart hammer in my chest and builds the tension in my stomach. I lift my hand and run my thumb over the green line, a jolt of electricity shoots through me. Lexa's thighs tighten around my waist, and she lets out a growl, launching forward, pinning my hands above my head and kissing me hard.

My body arches into her and she pulls away controlling the contact and driving me mad with want. I pull my hands from her grasp, tug her singlet over her head and flip us, so she is now beneath me, her torso in only a chest binding.

She grins as I lean in and kiss her deeply before moving to her neck and peppering a line of kisses there. Lexa's hands slip under my tunic and

pull at me as my tongue runs a trail down her neck. I reach her shoulder and a small green wound appears on her collar bone, emerald light pouring out of the speck. Lexa's breath hitches as it arrives, and I lean in and flick it with the tip of my tongue. A small sharp zap travels through my mouth and hands fly to my head and hold me in place.

"Claire," Whispers Lexa as she rolls her hips beneath me.

The light around us flashes green and this time Lexa does let out a breathy moan as a small thumb sized wound opens on her arm.

A movement to the side of us draws my attention and I am startled to see Melissa standing just outside, shaking her hand, and looking grumpy. She moves her hands about in an animated way and I can see she is talking but I cannot hear a word. Lexa notices my gaze and follows it. She closes her eyes and takes in a deep, shuddering breath as she grips my thighs tightly.

I try to regain some composure even as my heart hammers in my chest and tightness coils in my stomach. "I had forgotten they were there."

Lexa sighs. "We have found a way to be invisible and silent and yet we still cannot get more than ten minutes alone."

I run my hands along her shoulders and down over her ribs. I raise my eyebrow at the goosebumps that appear on her arms, and I grin at her. "I am sure if we are creative, we can find a way to make ten minutes work."

Lexa's hips move under mine, and she lets out the most delightful sound. I lean down and kiss her again. The moment is short but leaves the promise of more. I pull away, take her hand and climb off her. Melissa is still animated in her hand waving and obviously saying something with a high level of outrage. Anyone would think we had interrupted her.

"Do you think we are more or less likely to get time alone together if we tell them?" I ask.

"If what Tash and Nathaniel have had to endure from Melissa and Lucas these last few days is anything to go by, I am inclined to say less." Lexa replies as she pulls her armour on and redoes the fastenings. I eye the garment with disappointment.

I cannot help but pull her in for another searing kiss that I have to fight to rein in. When we break apart, I say, "Let's not tell them just yet. I don't want to give Melissa any more enthusiasm for interrupting future moments than she already has."

Lexa's green eyes are dark with want and she replies, "Then a secret it shall be. For now, at least."

I lean in and give her a quick peck before I let go of her hand and pick up my cold tea.

"Finally!" comes Melissa's voice. I glance up at her to see her cross her arms. "You two have been in there for so long that I thought you both had passed out or something."

"We are well," Lexa replies, and I notice her normally perfect braids are rumpled, and I glance about to see if anyone else has noticed.

"I told you they would be fine." Comes Tash's voice from across the fire.

Melissa eyes us, her gaze lingering on the pin size magical wounds on my hands. "It worked then?"

I nod, smiling despite myself I say, "Lexa and I can use our magic with minimal harm."

"I don't know. You two look breathless," Melissa remarks and I feel my cheeks heat up. "Maybe you need to work on your magical endurance."

Lexa shifts beside me. "We shall endeavour to work on it more often."

My heart hammers almost painfully at the comment and I suddenly become very interested in my tea.

Tash pulls the blanket up around her as she lays beside Nathaniel. "It would be helpful if you didn't buzz around them while they use magic."

"It is—distracting," Lexa confirms, and I must fight to keep the grin from my face.

Melissa throws her hands in the air. "Someone has to keep you lot alive."

A loud snore breaks the conversation, and we turn to see Nathaniel sound asleep and snoring with a projection that is sure to alert everything of our presence.

"It is a good thing Atorus is here," Melissa remarks as she finally moves away and climbs into her blanket.

"He took a hit to the nose today and it is a bit swollen," Tash explains as she gently turns his sleeping head. It definitely doesn't stop the sound, but it does reduce it. "He should be back to normal tomorrow."

"If he isn't, I can try to heal it," I say.

Tash gives me a broad smile. "Thank you, Claire."

I climb under my blanket and Lexa slides in behind me, her arm slipping around my waist and pulling me close. I smile and relax into her hold as the breathing of the group surrounding us settles into the deep slow rhythm of sleep. This is the first night in a long time that no one needs to be on watch, and it would seem everyone is taking advantage of Atorus's protection.

A small kiss lands on the back of my neck and my body blazes with adrenaline and affection again. I take a few calming breaths and grip Lexa's hand tightly. This tension between us needs an outlet, or I may not be able to control myself.

I force my mind off the track it is trying to follow, and I think about the lightning witch. That strike seemed to be about a days walk away. We are close but Atorus's words about her have me concerned. This lightning sounds very dangerous. It will be worse if she thinks of us as a threat and can control the direction of it.

I close my eyes and take a few slow breaths, trying to find a balance between planning and overthinking. Lexa shifts behind me, and her breathing has evened out. I focus on it and drift into sleep.

I poke at the cold scorpion leg in my hand, the reddish flesh poking out of the hard exoskeleton. I grimace as my stomach rumbles but for some reason I really don't want to eat it. It just seems really gross. The way the slimy flesh hangs out of the exoskeleton that comes apart in flakes that get stuck all over your fingers if you so much as hold it too hard.

Lucas nudges me. "What's wrong? Don't like your bug?"

My nose crinkles as Melissa uses her knife to work out a large chunk of flesh from her scorpion leg. "How can she know?" she says. "She hasn't even tried it yet."

I cast her an accusing glance. "I am working up to it," I defend.

Lexa places a hand on my thigh. "You should eat Claire. We cannot know when we will next get a meal and you have used a lot of magic lately."

My cheeks heat up as my mind flashes to the last time I used magic and I stare down at my breakfast. I take a deep breath, pry out a chunk of brown flesh and shove it in my mouth. The flavour is sweet and a little nutty. I chew and something crunches in my mouth. I shudder and swallow the thing whole.

Melissa is watching me intensely. “Did you get some exoskeleton?”

I nod and work hard to keep the small amount of scorpion I managed to get down in. I don’t think it will be any better coming up than it was going down.

I put the scorpion down. “I’m not hungry,” I say.

Tash and Melissa’s eyebrows might just crawl off their faces.

“What?” Tash says in a mocking voice. “A food has been discovered that cannot be consumed by Claire?”

“I didn’t think such a thing existed,” Melissa adds looking at me like I have just sprouted wings.

Nathanial reaches over and grabs my discarded scorpion leg. “Well, better not waste it,” he declares before making short work of it. Skeleton and all.

I swallow down a wave of nausea and turn away from Nathanial. Lucas discreetly hands me a chunk of dried meat and I take it gratefully. I chew on the tough meat with relish, even as my jaw protests. Atorus rises to its feet and stretches its magnificent yellow wings. It turns to look at me with unnerving double pupils. I slip my hand into my secret pocket and grasp the gem, the cold stone smooth in my hand.

The fire flairs in my brain. “I will take my leave. I thank you and your band of runtlings for your assistance. Should you need me, use the scale puny one and I shall find you.”

With that Atorus launches into the air with an impressive show of strength and its powerful wings beat with a force that stirs up the sand around us, I raise my hand to cover my eyes as the wind swirls around us. The force of the air from the beating wings presses me down into the ground and I doubt I could rise to my feet even if I wanted to. Almost as soon as it began, the wind stops and when I remove my hand from my eyes Atorus is gone, and the fire is out.

Lexa climbs to her feet. “Well, we should follow Atorus’s lead.”

Melissa scrambles to her feet and hurries over to the leather wind breaks and carefully cuts them from the deteriorating wooden frames. She rolls them up and hands them to Lucas who slowly takes them and puts them into his bag.

“What?” Melissa asks. “It is not like anyone is coming up the mountain pass anytime soon and it is highly unlikely it will get used again

by the guards.” She crosses her arms. “Even if it was, this will be very helpful for us, if I could bring the tripod I would.”

“This leather is heavy,” Lucas whines.

Nathanial takes one of the hides and tucks it into his bag without a word.

“It is a good idea, without the cavern roof we cannot know what to expect from the elements,” Lexa says and heads out back into the open mountainous terrain towards the lightning.

I follow suit and swing the backpack across my shoulders and take another bite of the dried meat in my hand. I have never been so happy to have such a sore jaw. All too soon we are leaving the comfort of our little camp and are heading in the direction of the lightning witch.

Chapter Ten

The day passes by uneventfully and as evening starts to set in a cold breeze picks up and whistles ominously through the rocks surrounding us. The wind picks up the fine sand and throws it into my face and eyes. It is not pleasant and the shrieking of the wind through the rocks reminds me far too much of the mushrooms in Ethira.

I stare down at the path, it is the easiest way to move forward without constantly getting sand in my eyes. My eyes fall on a change in the path at my feet. It suddenly becomes neat and well maintained, it is almost like someone drew a line and decided the new more glamorous path should start here with absolutely no other warning. I stop on the less pristine side of the path almost afraid to stand on the glittering white track ahead of us, I tilt my head and notice the crushed rock has something new in it.

I drop down to collect some of the white material in my hands, about half of it is smooth white pebbles and the other is white flat chunks that have ridges.

Lucas stoops beside me to inspect a handful of his own. “No way,” he mutters as he lifts his glasses to get a closer look at the chunks in his hand.

“What?” I ask as I carefully return my pile to the path where I had removed it. The wind dares to pick up the particles as I drop them and blows them away into the distance. Only the heaviest chunks make it back to the path at my feet.

He pokes through the white lumps in his palm. “These look like shells.”

“Shells?” Melissa stops to inspect the path herself. Her hair is distinctly windswept, and I can see the tangles as her ringlets catch one another in an attempt to stay in place. She sits back on her knees and says, “How could someone have collected this many?”

“Aren’t they rare?” Tash asks as she looks over the expansive path.

“The guards have a significant trade ring around them.” Nathaniel grunts. “Some shells are almost as valuable as gold.”

“They are down here,” Lucas replies dusting his hands off and rising to his feet. I feel a little jealous of the way his glasses must be protecting

his eyes in this wind. He turns to us and adds, "Although, I have heard they are numerous in places on the surface."

"Getting them up the mountainside cannot have been easy," Lexa remarks placing her hands on her hips.

"Or cheap," Nathaniel adds crossing his arms.

I eye the path and look at the winding white track that leads to an impressive wall of bricks in the distance. The wall is huge and stretches as far as I can see in both directions. It would not be an easy thing to climb, and a lot of time must have been dedicated to its construction. How did they even get that many bricks up here? I glance around. Maybe they made them from materials up here?

I lick my dry lips and say, "I doubt anyone could have managed either without the attention of Darkmor."

"Or help," Melissa says grasping the hilt of a dagger.

Well, that is an unpleasant thought.

Lexa runs her hands through her hair dark and beautiful braids. "The evidence is building as to the lighting witches' loyalty. I cannot say I enjoy the conclusions I am drawing."

A blast of yellow lightning appears behind the red brick wall and seems quite the distance from the bricks. The yellow ribbon shoots into the sky from the ground and flashes brightly with a loud crack. The flash is so bright at it burns a track through my eyes and I continue to see the strike long after it is gone. The hairs on my arms stand on end and I look towards the wall with apprehension. The light is fading around us and I glance up at the hole in the cavern roof to see a fantastic array of oranges, reds, and purples.

I drag my eyes back to the wall and ask, "Do we try to go in now? Or in the morning?"

"The timing of our mission is critical," Lexa remarks. "I find it unlikely that tomorrow the lightning will be any less of a threat than it is today."

Our eyes meet and I hold her green eyes. My heartbeat quickens as I recall last night, and I berate myself for being so overcome in this moment. Nathaniel clears his throat and starts down the white path, his footsteps crunching loudly with every pace. Tash shrugs and follows him.

Melissa stares between me and Lexa for a long moment before Lexa spins on her heel and moves towards the wall. I stare at the white path with

such intensity that I hope Melissa will just think I'm being weird and move on. Finally, she follows the others and I trail after her. We pass clusters of brambles and an assortment of small spikey ground growth. It grows in such density that it would be very difficult to leave the path without having to walk through them. I eye the wicked brown barbs and I don't hold much faith that my boots would last very long walking over those.

It doesn't take long to come up to the wall, which is easily taller than three people in height. The bricks are packed tightly together in a way that leaves a pleasant pattern. Every third brick is lighter and the illusion it creates on the wall is one of many rows of stairs. The wall is completely flat and I cannot see any gaps between the bricks. This looks like the quality you would expect from the capital, not at the top of a mountain in the middle of nowhere.

I drop my eyes to the metal gate blocking our way. It is a massive sheet of metal, the surface is flawless, little bronze, copper and gold flowers are twisted across its surface in delicate ribbons of metal that must have taken an expert to make and place on the gate. Some of the flowers are no bigger than my palm and each of the petals are the thickness of a nail. Other are larger than my torso and the detail on each is exquisite. The scene is beautiful and truly a work of art.

"It is beautiful," Melissa says raising her hand to trace the patterns. "The metal work is unbelievable. This would not have been easy to make."

Nathanial grips the bars and gives the whole thing a shake. Melissa raises her hands, and I can see her fight off the impulse to stop him as he puts two fist sized dents in the beautiful metallic patterns. The gate groans but holds fast.

Melissa looks positively devastated. "So many hours of work from a blacksmith master and you crushed it in a few seconds."

Nathanial shrugs and turns to Lexa. "I won't be able to get in with brute force. The thing is solid."

Lucas taps Nathanial on the shoulder and asks, "If I may?"

Nathanial steps aside and Lucas runs his hands along the gate searching. "There must be a lock here somewhere," Lucas mutters.

Melissa leans in to help him, I cannot tell if Melissa's help is to get through the gate or to prevent the delicate metalwork from further brutality.

They search just about every crevice when Melissa suddenly says, “Ha!”

She carefully twists one of the golden flowers and it slides on an invisible hinge, revealing a keyhole. Lucas inspects it closely, pulls a small white ball from a tin in his pocket and slots it into the hole.

He looks at us as he pulls his flint out. “You might want to step back and try not to look directly at it.”

I shuffle back and Lucas sends a spark directly into the lock. There is a small explosion and when I look back the lock is a mangled mess, a smoking hole where it had been before. The golden flower falls off onto the white path at our feet and with it small black chunks that ruin the perfect surface. Melissa crouches and carefully picks up the metal flower. Aside from being a little scorched on the back it seems whole.

“You lot have no appreciation for art,” she sighs as she carefully tucks it away into her backpack.

“The gate is beautiful,” Lexa agrees. “But unfortunately, time is essential.”

Melissa begrudgingly nods and Nathaniel gives the gate a massive shove. It groans and twists slightly under his efforts, but it looks like it will come loose. Lucas and even Melissa joins in and together they push the gate free. It groans as it swings inwards on a significant lean, the edge of the gate digging deeply into the crushed shell inside the wall. They step back to reveal what the gate had been hiding.

My eyes fall on a range of stocky plant life within the walls. Vibrant greens, reds and oranges are everywhere. It looks like a paradise compared to the desert filled with cliff sides and boulders we have been walking through up until now. The gardens seem to completely fill the space within the walls, I can see red brick walls in the distance and the space inside them is large. Plants are everywhere except for a ring in the middle where a large brown lump sits surrounded by a ring of white path. Deep scarring runs through the ground near us, it is jagged and fans out like branches. The black scar still smoulders, small billows of smoke rise from it in a steady stream. The odour of burning shell and plant life reaches my nose and I crinkle it.

I place my hand on the gate where the lock had been and the cool sharp metal settles under my finger tips. I move around to the other side of the gate, which is just as delicately decorated as the front, I notice there is

no matching keyhole. Once this gate is locked, it can only be opened from the outside.

I swallow, "I don't think this was here to keep us out."

Lexa comes over to inspect the front of the gate. "But to keep the witch in."

"Yes, but is she a prisoner or a threat?" Tash asks squinting into the garden.

"Everything in here is very lavish and the gate alone must be worth a quarter of the wealth in Voltren." Melissa says dryly.

"And prisoners do not usually have such a lavish cage," Nathaniel adds.

We look into the paradise of waxy leaved plants, and I notice scars like the one on the ground near us are everywhere. Some are still smouldering like the one just off the path in front of us, others have plant life growing over them in patches. Large chunks have been blown out of the walls in sections and the edges have rounded over time. One of the dents is so deep it would have blasted through almost anything and it might have if the wall hadn't been as thick as it is. Something which I suspect is intentional. This place doesn't look new, but it does look well kept. This lightning witch has been here for a very long time.

Melissa points into the distance. "Is that a house?"

I follow her arm and my eyes land on the mottled brown circular structure I had spotted before. I can see that it seems to have three clearly defined sections and something that might be a doorway. It certainly looks deliberately and expertly made. I can see from here that the structure looks to be made of hide and even might have windows. A little chair and table sit out the front with a few empty and broken pots beside it. The picturesque hut is complete with puffs of smoke that rise from a column on one side of the construction. It looks like a dwelling from a story I was once told.

Nathaniel draws his sword and Lexa raises a hand to stop him and says, "We should not approach in a threatening way. She may be more willing to help us and our cause if we are not the first to raise weapons."

"It's not really like our swords will make a whole lot of difference against something that can do that in any case," Lucas says as he gestures to the mangled landscape that still smokes in several places.

Nathanial twitches and aggressively sheaths his sword. "I don't like this," he grunts crossing his arms. "What are we to do if she doesn't offer the same courtesy and blasts us with her magic?"

I pull my necklace from my pocket and drape it around my neck. "Then we use magic too."

Nathanial grits his jaw but nods. "It is better than nothing."

Lexa smiles at me and my heart rate speeds up and a heat coils in my belly. Why does she have to be so beautiful? I close my eyes and shake my head. Really? Here? I berate myself and try to control my body which seems determined to relive some of my worst teenage impulses.

"Stay close," Lexa says her warm voice interrupting my thoughts. "Remember the magic needs to form around you."

Together we bunch up and head down the path, Lexa and Lucas careful to be close enough to touch me should we need, but far enough away that we don't accidentally set the magic off. The path crunches loudly under our feet and I cannot help but wonder if it is its purpose. I move to the side of the path and peer at the plants, they are small, most of them no more than a hand length off the ground but they grow together in clusters of tightly packed bright colours. I crouch and touch one of the thick green leaves, it is fragile and snaps off accidentally. Inside the leaf is so full of moisture, that when I squeeze the leaf between my fingers liquid drips down my hand. It must be how the plants survive in this dry environment. I cannot see a source of water and they must depend on the mists that show up in the cavern from time to time. Lucas crouches beside me and I show him the leaf.

He takes it and turns it in his hands saying, "They are all some kind of succulent." He brushes his hands over a nearby cluster of orange plants, each of the triangular leaves are pointed in a beautiful circular pattern. "These are not native to this area though, or we would have seen them in the desert on the way here."

"These gardens seem very well tended." Lexa says from behind me as she gestures to the immaculate path and the obvious rows of colours within the garden.

Lucas nods. "Some of these plants are very specialised as well." He points to one of the taller plants. I look over the thick red plant which rises from a ring of orange ground cover. The tall growth is about chest height and roughly as thick at my arm. It points proudly to the cavern roof and

turns into three with three different length points at the end. It reminds me of the tritons we were made use in the arena during Darkmor's ocean phase. Weirdly, the plant is dotted with a pattern of little orange lumps that don't seem to quite fit the plant and seem like they aren't normally part of it.

Lucas waves his arms about gesturing to the plant. "That one is called a rubet and grows finger long seed spikes twice a year. If they are not all plucked in time the tree fires them in every direction at high speed." He flings his arms out wide and his glasses fall a little down his nose with the movement. He pushes them back up and continues, "They are not easy to remove either, if you remove just one of them out of order the whole plant can fire the seeds prematurely."

"That sounds dangerous, not specialised." Nathaniel remarks as he drops a plant to the ground and wipes his hand on his pants.

"It is highly specialised," Lucas insists. "The rubet plant is very prolific and judging from the size of it, I would estimate that it is about twelve years old. This place would be packed with these types of plants by now if someone was not collecting the seeds."

I shudder at the idea of a place packed with plants that can fire spiked seeds in every direction twice a year for being bumped.

"Is now the time of year the seeds need collecting?" I ask as I eye the orange bumps on the plant once more. They seem far more sinister after Lucas's words.

Lucas shakes his head. "They should be starting to appear now, but they won't be ready for picking for another three weeks or so."

"What are you doing here?" A shrill voice fills the air.

I spin around to see quite possibly the oldest person I have ever laid eyes on. The old woman is in a mute brown outfit with some kind of dirty apron thrown over it. Her hair is loose and wild, but it is so white it is almost painful to look at, and it really stands in contrast to her chocolate coloured skin. Her hair flails about in the wind, coupled with her darting, light blue eyes, the effect is quite alarming. Her withered hand points accusingly at us and I can see even from here there is dirt all over it. My eyes land on a bucket and spade at her feet, a pile of rich black dirt tumbling out of it and onto the white shells below.

"Where did she come from?" Melissa asks. "I swear I was watching, and she just appeared."

Lexa turns to the woman and raises her hands to show they are empty.
“We just want to talk.”

“I already did my bit this month! You are here to take me back to him, aren’t you?” The woman rages and I can see yellow sparks forming at her fingertips. “I can hear the whispers! The whispers never lie!”

“What whispers?” Tash says quietly to our group and her eyes scout the garden looking for others that may be with the lightning witch.

“HA! See even now you plot against me!” The witch screams and waves her hands about as if she is trying to swat something from her face. “I won’t go back!”

“Go back where?” Lexa asks.

“To him!” The witch screams pulling at her hair. She paces rapidly from side to side, and I slowly rise to my feet.

“We aren’t here to take you anywhere,” Lexa insists, taking a gentle step forward.

“LIAR!” The witch wails and throws her hands in front of her, a blast of yellow light spills from them and travels towards us at an alarming rate.

We jump out of the way, and it explodes where we had been standing, the heat is so intense I am almost sure my face and hands have been burned. I close my stinging eyes and try to turn away from the intense heat as it washes over me. The clap that follows it is so loud I am forced to put my hands over my ears even as chunks of rocks pelt my face and body. I stumble about crushing succulents with my hands and knees as my eyes stream from the brightness of the blast and the dizziness that comes with it.

“We are friends,” Lexa insists her voice raised over the chaos.

“Friends?” The woman says, her voice suddenly uncertain.

I focus my streaming eyes on Lexa, blood runs down the side of her cheek as she nods.

“Friends.” She repeats.

The witch stands twitching for a moment before she suddenly bends over and lets out a dry hacking cough. It lasts long moments, and we all stand very still, unsure if approaching her would be welcome. After damage from the last bolt of lightning no one wants to give her a reason to go for round two. The lightning witch is doubled over and struggles to pull a cloth from the pocket of her apron. She uses it to cover her mouth, but the coughing is so violent her small frame shudders aggressively and

together with her shaking hands stops the cloth from doing anything useful. Finally, the hacking ends and the woman spits a red clump into the shells beside her before turning to us once more.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” She asks, wiping the blood from her face with her cloth and stuffing it back into her apron. “Friends are welcome.”

She beckons us and we all stand still for a moment before Lexa takes a slow hesitant step towards the lightning witch. “My name is Lexa,” she says placing her hand on her chest.

The witch twitches and spins on her heel yelling at the plants nearest, “Don’t talk over our friends!” She points accusingly at the pale red leaves for a moment before she turns back to us. “Sorry dear, could you say it again?”

I see Lexa’s hands twitch before she repeats slowly, “My name is Lexa.”

The witch bows. “It is nice to meet you Lexa. My name is Ageth.”

“Ageth is a nice name,” Lexa replies.

Ageth screams, “I said quiet!” The witch turns and blasts a patch of plants beside her with yellow lightning, they explode into the air and the loud booming crack rolls over us again as a wave of heat stings my already sore face. It fades almost as quickly as it came and the hairs on my arms raise as if fighting to get away from my skin.

The witch crouches in the shells at her feet and pulls at her hair. I am starting to see how it become such a wild mess. She removes one hand from her hair and chews aggressively on a thumbnail mumbling, “Medicine. Shouldn’t have had my medicine.”

I look at Lucas beside me who shrugs, Nathaniel is staring at the witch with such intensity that I feel like he is trying to burn an image into his brain.

“Would you like us to help you with your medicine?” Lexa asks, her voice clear but uncertain. I notice she had taken a step back since Ageth’s last explosion.

The witch begins to rock violently and whispers, “Medicine, medicine, medicine, medicine, medicine, medicine, medicine.” Little yellow sparks start to form at the fingers clutching her elbows.

“I think she might use her power again,” I say in a soft voice.

Lucas turns to look at me and he frowns.

“SHUT UP!” the woman yells clawing at her ears, the movement makes her necklace fall free from her shirt and the blinding yellow gem can be seen from here. “Too much noise. Can’t focus!” she bangs her fist to her head. “Important friends. Must remember.”

Lexa looks back at us after the witch finishes her convoluted sentence and sits completely still in the crushed shell, her arms covering her knees. I don’t know what is more alarming. The aggressive agitation from before or the sudden stillness of now.

Lexa takes another step forward and crouches a few paces from the witch. “Ageth?”

The witch looks up at her alarmed, a bloodied fingernail near her mouth. “Where did you come from!” She screams, yellow light pooling in her hands.

I break free from the group to run towards Lexa who is standing up and stepping back with her hands out. “Ageth, it’s okay. We are friends.”

“How do you know my name! Have you been watching me?” The witch screams, spit flying from her mouth. “They are always watching me, wanting to steal what is mine and take me back!”

I am a few steps away when her eyes narrow and she screams, “You can’t have it!”

She throws her hands out just as I lurch myself at Lexa, I take hold of her waist and as we tumble to the ground her hand grabs mine and our bubble forms as the witch directs a bolt of lightning at us. It hits the shield and reverberates off, racing towards the nearby wall and blasting a huge dent into the stone. As we hit the ground, I lose my grip on Lexa and our magic dissolves around us.

“Evil spirits!” Ageth cries and summons another pooling of yellow in her hands.

We roll in the dust, and I scramble to my feet. Grabbing hold of Lexa’s hand, I pull her up and together we bolt back towards our group. Pain burns across my shoulders as a magical wound opens there. Within seconds we reach the group, Nathaniel is drawing his sword and Melissa already has a knife in her hand. Tash is yelling something and looking around wildly as Lucas points behind us his eyes huge and terrified.

I let go of Lexa’s hand, our bubble disappears, and we step into the middle of our surprised group. I grasp Lexa’s hand again and this time the shimmering blue and green bubble reforms around our group. Focusing

intently, I try to tell my magic that all I want to do is create the protective bubble. The lightning attacks us again bouncing off our magic and ricocheting in a random direction blasting a deep line through the nearby garden. Bright green and blue cracks appear on the surface of our light bubble, ribboning in every direction. My head bursts with pain at the same moment and I see Lexa's hand fly to her head.

"What does that mean?" Tash asks pointing at the cracks.

"Is it breaking?" Melissa asks at almost the same time.

I grasp Lucas's hand and purple light filters in with the green and blue. The cracks get smaller and less defined.

"I don't know," I say as working through the pounding in my head as I start moving us away from the witch. "I don't want to hang around to find out."

We bolt towards the gate, our pounding footsteps the only sound on the crushed shell beneath our feet. I turn back to see the witch silently screaming and sending blasts of lightning in every direction, causing an unbelievable wave of destruction. Lexa takes the lead and manoeuvres us around the mangled gate and back down the path lined with the wickedly barbed brambles.

We pound down the trail and Lexa drags us onto the uneven terrain as soon as the brambles have cleared. She heads straight for an outcrop nearby, from here it looks like it will have a good overhang. It should offer increased protection from predators. As long as that predator isn't Ageth the lightning witch.

We weave our way through the pile of rocks that surround the overhang until we reach a place that cannot be easily seen from the gate. We tumble in under the projecting rock and crouch, the low clearance preventing us from standing completely upright. Nathaniel does his best to check the space from inside our magical bubble while Lexa stares back in the direction of the lightning still streaming into the sky uncomfortably close from here.

"Do you think she will follow us out here?" Tash asks glancing back in the direction of Ageth's garden.

Nathaniel crosses his arms. "I don't know if she knows what she thinks."

Lexa raises an eyebrow and squeezes my hand. "It is a crude way to put it. However, I do not disagree."

“She seemed to have short term memory problems,” I say recalling the way she had forgotten we were there moments after speaking with us. “Perhaps she will forget we were there once she calms down and returns to tending to her plants.”

Lexa nods. “I don’t think we are being pursued. I believe it is safe to stop using our magic.”

Sighing I look down at our joined hands and notice the green shoots sprouting at our feet, hopefully that didn’t leave a trail all the way here. I let go of Lucas’s hand and linger for a second longer twining my fingers in with Lexa’s before I let hers go too. Nathaniel draws his sword and does a proper inspection of our new hiding place. I notice this time he looks above the rock and not just around it.

I step out of the overhang and look back the way we came, relieved to see there isn’t a trail of grass leading to our location. In this desolate place everything would be sure to notice something like that. It seems Lucas and I need to stand still to grow things.

“It is clear,” Nathaniel announces as he sheaths his sword.

Another boom in the distance causes all of us to snap our heads back in the direction from which we had just come and my eyes snag at the last second on a bolt of lightning. It seems unbelievably loud after the bubble had silenced everything outside for so long. Another bolt of lightning fires off to the side of the wall and blasts a mountain peak nearby. How long can she do that for? Using my magic even short term hurts me.

I chew on my lip. Her relationship to the gem is different to Edwards. He only ever used his accidentally. The witch is very much in control of when she uses her powers and how. Perhaps not in complete control of herself, but the difference is there.

My hands and face sting and as I look down at the hot red, I think about how a cool wet cloth would be helpful to draw out the burns. As I watch, the burn fades and my necklace shines brightly, even without touching Lexa or Lucas. A wound opens on my neck, and I feel the heat of my magic pour from it. I close my eyes and focus on the healing. If it is going to do it anyway I might as well practice. I focus on the thought that all I want to do is heal the burns and repeat it over and over. The pain in my hands and face fade and when I open my eyes the wound that has appeared on my forearm feels much smaller than the one on my neck.

Lexa is watching me intensely. “Did you just heal?”

I nod and my eyes land on Lexa's reddened face and the cut across her cheek, her burns must have been bad. I move towards her. "Take off your necklace," I command.

Lexa raises an eyebrow. "I will not let you heal me at expense of your health Claire."

"Take off your necklace." I repeat stepping closer. She stands firm and crosses her arms across her chest. I step toward her again and we are now so close we are almost touching. I look into her eyes and say, "I will heal you."

"I will not take the necklace off," Lexa insists.

I take her hand and the light bubble appears around us. "Claire!" Lexa says in alarm. "You will hurt yourself and I cannot be the one responsible for-."

I step in and kiss her, ending whatever, she was about to say, and I feel the magic flow through me into her. I smile into the kiss, I don't see why I can't do two things at once. I grip her hair tightly as the kiss grows more heated. Reluctantly I am aware of the time we have, and I slow our lips down and pull away. The wounds on Lexa's face are gone and I cannot help but notice how dark her eyes have grown. I brush my thumb against her cheek and our lips meet for a second time. Another wound opens on my stomach, and I gasp and pull away. I lift my shirt to find a thumbnail sized wound there, blue light streaming through.

"Claire," Lexa says in a soft voice as her eyes stare at the wound.

I kiss her once more and lean back with a smile. "It was completely worth it."

She grins back at me, and I squeeze her hand once and as I let go, the bubble falls away.

"Wow," Comes Melissa's voice. "You look like you two fought it out over this healing thing."

"Yeah, look at Lexa's hair," Tash adds. "Even the witch didn't make that much of a mess of it."

Lexa clears her throat. "I will not underestimate Claire again."

I turn to the others and ask, "Who is next?"

Melissa holds her hands up. "I won't fight you. If you are offering I will more than happily accept. These burns sting."

I move over to Melissa and take her hand. I focus my magic on her burns and think about cooling them and adding moisture back into the

skin. The redness in her hands and face fades and she is pale once more. I sigh and drop her hand. The magical wounds on my hand are smaller than the ones I got healing Lexa. I smile to myself. It could be because I am getting better at it, but it might also be because I was a little distracted.

Melissa touches her face. "That is loads better. Thanks Claire, I will do everything in my power to find something for dinner that isn't scorpion."

Lucas takes his glasses from his face and wipes them with his shirt. "I think I saw some edible mushrooms on the way here. I will come with you."

Melissa looks him over. "Did you get burnt?"

He shakes his head. "Just a little, I was further away than everyone else. I was also largely shielded by Claire." He checks his hands and touches his face. "I think I am okay."

I run my eyes over him and aside for some bumps and bruises he seems okay. I smile at them. "Happy hunting."

They wave and together head off into the maze of rocks around us. Nathaniel stomps past and climbs a nearby boulder and stares into the distance. He points at something and says, "There is a large skeleton not too far from here. If we are persistent enough, we should be able to light the bones and get them burning for cooking."

Tash nods and starts heading in that direction. Nathaniel seems stumped for a moment and scrambles to follow her. I suspect they will be doing more than bone collecting.

I turn to Lexa and say, "I didn't know you could burn bones."

She nods and moves to inspect a weirdly shaped rock wall. "It is not easy to light a bone fire, but it can be done. However, it will have an unpleasant odour, and we won't be able to cook directly on it."

Lexa touches a section of the rock wall, and I look closely at it for the first time. The rocks seem stacked in layers. It is all one piece and solid, but it looks like it was once many pieces before it was all squished together. Lexa picks up a large fist sized stone and hammers on the rock face, and a large section comes off with three layers. Lexa scrutinizes it and uses her hammer stone and a pointed rock to hit the surface once. A large flat rock disconnects from the rest, and Lexa carries it over to me.

I realise that Lexa had been working on creating a cooking stone while I stood here and watched dumbly. I grit my jaw and begin clearing a

space for the fire. I take care to do it away from the patch of grass, which will offer slightly more comfort than the hard ground at my feet. I scuff at the ground and realise it only has a very small layer of sand over a rocky surface. I will not be able to dig a small fire pit like we have been doing. We will need a different kind of fireplace. I start collecting and stacking large rocks in a circle.

“Claire,” Lexa says gently. “You should rest, you have used a lot of magic today.”

I brush strands of hair from my face and sit back on my heels. “I feel okay,” I say. “I am a little sore and tired, but Leonardo’s advice has been helpful.” I smile at her. “I think I am finally starting to get it.”

She flashes me a brilliant smile revealing almost perfect white teeth. “I am heartened to hear it, Claire.”

My eyes fall to her lips. “How long do you think we have before the others return?”

Lexa opens her mouth and whatever she is about to say is cut off as I hear Lucas say, “Awe do you miss me already?”

I spin to face him and stutter out, “That—that was quick.”

He nods and places his pile of mushrooms on the ground. “Melissa sent me away. Apparently, I was scaring all the ‘non scorpion’ food away.”

Lexa flashes me a sad smile and crouches to help Lucas. “Melissa can be particular. In my experience she only likes to hunt with other people if they are the bait.”

Chapter Eleven

A loud crack startles me awake and I bolt upright to find Nathaniel with two large chunks of bone in his hands. Each are about as thick as his arm and look very old, they even seem a little grey, like they have been left outside for so long the colour has disappeared. He picks up another one and snaps in two.

I rub sleep from my eyes and try to figure out when I had fallen asleep. It certainly wasn't intentional. The last I remember is sitting back against the overhang and resting trying to get some relief from the pounding headache that had formed behind my eyes. It would seem I rested them for much longer than I had intended.

I rub my hands across my face, the headache has improved since the rest, but it still lingers. Another loud crack startles me and is like a needle to my brain. I peer through my fingers at Nathaniel who is working on turning another giant bone into arm length pieces. Tash beside him carefully assesses each of the broken bones, placing them aside in a pile. She carefully selects three bones, and she works diligently propping them up with stones to ensure they stay upright.

Leaning over I take one of the bones from the already impressively large pile. This one is about as thick as my pinkie finger and when I turn the porous bone, I find it is very dry and brittle. What are they going to do with all these bones. Surely, they aren't going to try and cook them? There cannot be any nutrition left in them.

Lexa sits beside Tash and takes the smallest bones from the pile and crushes them with a large round rock creating many smaller shards, these are carefully collected and placed into a second much smaller pile. Lucas sits beside her crushing the white rock Melissa had found at the last cave, he meticulously crushes a small section into a fine white powder using a round stone and a rock with a divot.

I recall the way the powder had burned brightly the last time Lucas and Melissa had used it to light a fire. The rhythmic grinding of rock adds to the ambience of the growing wind as it whistles around the large rocks that shelter us.

“I see you are awake,” Tash says with a smile as she moves away from her completed pile to sit beside me.

I smile and stretch. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“Your magic is draining,” Lexa remarks as she collects the small shards of bone and takes it over to the fire pit. “It is not surprising, you seem better.”

“I feel better,” I say.

Nathanial draws his sword and in three blurs of movement he cuts the standing bones in half long ways. The halves fall to the ground with a clatter, revealing the dried and speckled marrow inside. He sits down without a word and begins sharpening his massive broad sword with a whetstone from his pocket, I can see the blunted sections from here. Cutting through those bones cannot have been easy to do.

“Melissa still hasn’t returned?” I ask as I rise to help Tash carry the newly cut bones to the campfire stones I had laid out earlier. I watch her for a moment and copy, stacking the bones flat side up.

She shakes her head. “Sometimes hunting isn’t always successful. That would be very rare for Melissa, but I have seen very few living things this close to the witch that don’t reside in her garden.”

Lexa gestures to the overhang and sheer rock walls around us. “Even here, there are no insects or spiders.” She glances about the space and adds, “It is unusual.”

Tash sprinkles a generous pile of crushed bone on top of one of the bone halves and sits back. “It’s creepy, is what it is.”

“It might have something to do with the lightning witch,” Lucas says as he takes Tash’s place by the fire and pours the rock powder over the crushed bone. “I am not comfortable here, being this close to her is anxiety provoking. Even the animals must feel its effect.”

He pulls his flint from his pocket as Tash crouches beside him, a handful of bone splinters in her hand and a small pile of skinny bones at her feet. Lucas pushes his glasses up his nose. “This will be very bright. Try not to look directly at it.”

I turn away and the clip of the flint striking the metal of Lucas’s knife is followed by the small crackle of flames. When I look back, I can see a very small spark that is carefully being fed by Tash as Lucas diligently blows on the small ember, his air giving it life. It looks like the bone chips are actually burning. I raise my eyebrow and lean in full of disbelief. But

there it is, even as I watch the other bones catch, the marrow of the large bone under it begins to splutter like it too is thinking about contributing to the fire. I crinkle my nose as a foul odour reaches it. Lexa wasn't wrong, the pungent smell certainly is unpleasant.

"I didn't know you could use bones to make fire," I say staring at the glowing flames.

"It takes a lot of work, and it isn't ideal," Lexa says. "But it can be done, we were lucky this time. It can take many tries to get a bone fire to light, and it looks as if we are successful on the first try."

The wind picks up and Lucas and Tash desperately shuffle around trying to shield the young flames from the gale that is picking up. The flames shudder alarmingly, and Lexa and I hurry over and help protect the tiny flames from the brutally cold wind.

The wind slows down and Lucas flaps his arm at his backpack not taking his eyes from the shuddering flames. "The hides. In my bag."

I scramble over to it and pull out the hides. One falls to the ground at my feet and the other unfolds in my hands. As I look at the thick leather, I realise this will not easily rehang, it will require rope and a place to fix it to. The wind picks up again and I hurry over to Lexa and hand her a corner of the hide, together we stretch it out and stand on the bottom corners, using it to protect the tiny fire from the elements currently doing their best to extinguish it. I shiver as the air rushes past me, pulling at my clothes and hair. Winter will be here soon, and I am not looking forward to travelling in the brutal winds that come with it.

I glance up at the new hole in the cavern roof. Winter might be worse this year, I have no idea what it is like on the surface, but I have a feeling we will find out with the size of that enormous hole. I suspect that is where the ferocity of this wind is coming from already. I fight the impulse to tuck my hands under my arms and shuffle my legs to ward off the shiver that is spreading through me. My clothes were never designed for this kind of weather. My arms are getting sore and heavy from holding the hide up. It feels like forever before Lucas and Tash have a healthy fire going, my arms are aching and heavy from holding the thick hide up in the air.

I turn to Lexa and ask, "Any ideas for how we can tie this up, so we don't need to hold it?"

Lexa runs her eyes over the hide and examines the area around us for long moments. I look over the stacked rock face and notice a jutting

section sticking up that has been eroded by the wind, it looks like a rope can be tied around it. The rock is conveniently in the small opening between us and the rest of the open mountain top. If placed carefully together with the overhang, it could block a lot of the wind. I eye the pillar and it seems like it could take a rope tied to it with the heavy hide attached. However, I cannot be certain how it will hold up as the hide is pushed by the wind.

“Lexa,” I say and raise my tired arm to point at the rock. “Can we make that work?”

Lexa turns to follow my arm. Her hair whips in the raising wind and she nods. “I think we could make it work. It is hard to say how it will go if this wind picks up anymore.”

I dig through my bag and pull out the length of rope. It is weird, it feels like so long ago that we bought this from Miss Q and I almost can’t believe we carried it around this whole time. I return to the hide and fumbling together, we thread the rope through the premade slits in the hide and tie it off. Lexa finds another place to tie off the cord on the other side. Now that the hide is fixed at the top with the rope the base of it flaps wildly in the wind, clapping loudly as it struggles against its bonds.

We hurry to collect rocks and start stacking them at the bottom of the thick leather pinning it to the ground. Wind still whistles over it, but it is no longer blowing directly at the fire that is now adding a noticeable measure of warmth to our little hiding place.

“Hey, are you lot trying to lock me out or something?” Comes Melissa’s voice from the other side of the hide wall.

I jump in surprise and realise Lexa and I had done too good of a job at blocking the gap. I move over to the corner and remove a few of the stones so I can lift the bottom flap. Melissa’s brown eyes peek through and she squeezes in, dragging with her a large, feathered creature.

“I have found a non-scorpion dinner!” She proclaims victoriously. She drops the dead creature and pulls her backpack around to the front of her and removes three large eggs, easily as big as Nathaniel’s fists. “I also found spoils.”

Lucas’s face looks like it is about to split with joy. “Oh, how I have missed eggs!”

“Well, miss them no longer my squinty eyed friend,” Melissa says as she passes him the eggs. He takes each of them like they are precious.

Tash takes the dead creature and begins removing the brown feathers, smiling and shaking her head. "I cannot believe you found a bird."

Melissa flops down. "Me either. The only thing I can think of is it has come from the surface through one of those giant holes in the cavern roof."

I look up at the darkened holes and see only darkness, no stars or moons tonight. Night has truly fallen, and it would seem the weather up there is just as unpleasant as the weather down here. Lexa places the rock on the fire, which is now going completely unattended, and I watch as the flames lick the edges of our cooking stone.

"We are fortunate indeed to have such a luxury for dinner," Lexa remarks as she looks over the large feathered creature.

Melissa seems immensely pleased with herself and looks at the feast she has provided with pride.

Nathanial sheaths his sword and grabs a feather. "Some of these larger feathers will be valuable, especially the ones like this," he says holding up a large and immaculate tail feather.

The colours on it are splendid. The way the shades of brown come together to make the feather look striped is certainly something worth looking at. I can see how some might place great value on it. Nathanial starts sorting through the pile and removing the best of the feathers and placing them aside.

"Hopefully they can survive until we find someone willing to trade them," Lucas says watching Nathanial pick through the feather.

"We can hope," Nathanial says in his gruff voices. "Funds would be helpful. We are going to need winter gear soon. The trouble will be finding someone willing to trade who is also willing to ignore the fact we are roaming free."

"And Claire's eye watering bounty," Melissa grins at me as if I should take great pride in the price over my head.

"I suspect we will need to take significantly lower than their value in such an instance," Lexa remarks, taking hold of the now plucked bird and cutting it into sections and setting it aside to be placed on the cooking rock once it is hot enough.

Nathanial nods. "As long as we get the gear we need to survive this winter, it will be enough."

The group falls into a silence and only the crackling of the fire and the howling of the wind can be heard. I look over at the straining hide and hope it will hold. Lexa flicks a small amount of blood from her knife off onto the stone and it sizzles on contact. Satisfied she begins laying the meat on the stone, each piece hissing on contact with the hot rock.

Lucas taps her on the shoulder. "May I?"

Lexa nods and Lucas summons his little purple tentacle and it waves around in front of the fire ready to turn the cooking meat. Lexa cracks the eggs over the end of the cooking stone that is unfilled by meat and clear goop with a yellow centre falls onto the stone crackling with the contact. Even as I watch the clear goop begins to turn white.

I have never eaten eggs or bird before, and I am looking forward to the experience. Everyone is so excited, and the smells are all ready making my mouth water. Even over the foul odour of the burning bones.

"Anyone have any ideas about how we can get near enough to the lightning witch to get that necklace?" Tash ventures, poking the fire with a long bone.

Melissa rubs her hands on her face and says through her fingers, "Not any that don't get us fried."

"It is complex," Lexa admits. "I felt like we almost had her focus for a little while there."

"I don't know how you did that," I say as my eyes flick up to meet hers. "I was still rolling on the ground recovering from the lightning strike and you were already on your feet trying to calm her."

Melissa's eyes flick between our faces and I make a point to break eye contact and stare at the ground. Melissa clears her throat, "At the risk of sounding too much like I am suffering hero worship, I will say this. Lexa is a born diplomat and always the first to respond in moments of crisis," Melissa says.

Lexa's cheeks turn pink and Tash pokes Melissa. "Careful Mel. That sounds a lot like praise."

Melissa stretches her arms to the sky. "Yes, well, I have been known to be grateful for the continuation of my life from time to time."

My eyes fall on the purple tentacle which becomes oddly flattened and scoops under the eggs, flipping them around so they are upside down on the rock. My eyes widen as the tentacle continues with the other two eggs. I didn't know it could change shape like that. Lucas is getting very

good with his magic. He sits beside the fire, purple pricks of light shining in three spots on his face, but his grin is brighter than them all.

“We could sneak up on her?” Nathaniel suggests.

Melissa shakes her head. “I don’t know. That rock path is designed to be an early alarm system. Those brambles looked to circle the outside wall completely, so climbing over it in a different spot for surprise would be an extremely difficult or impossible mission.” She sits back and twirls a knife in her hand. “And there is the way she just appeared. She didn’t make any sound before she spoke, and I could have sworn I had checked down the path only moments before she appeared halfway up it.”

“It is possible she came out of the garden,” Lucas suggests.

I nod. “She did look like she had been gardening. She was certainly dressed for it.”

Melissa nods but remains silent deep in thought as she stares into the flames.

“Eggs are ready,” Lucas chirps. “I think it would be a good idea if you used your cups as bowls.”

I dig through my bag and pull out my cup eager to try an egg. Lucas grins and cuts the now flat white eggs in half, revealing a solid orange centre. He gives half to everyone, ensuring each of us get an orange part.

I try to pick up my egg half from my cup but the sharp burn on my fingers reminds me it just came from the fire. Not to be put off, I draw my dagger, stab it, and take a bite. It is delicious. The smooth texture of the white blends nicely with the grainy texture of the orange centre and I find I really like it. All too soon it is gone. It has helped set the growing hunger in my stomach at bay, but I am glad we will have some more food to follow it. Now that the eggs are gone Lucas sets the brown mushrooms in the empty space on the cooking stone.

I smile, it will be nice to be completely full, using my powers makes me extra hungry. I think on dinner for a few moments before an idea slides into my brain.

“We could sneak up on her using our magic,” I say.

Melissa nods. “That would work.”

“When we last used our magic it really frightened her,” Lexa says unsure. “She seems unstable already and I would not want to cause her undue distress when we suddenly reappear before her.” Nathaniel opens

his mouth and Lexa holds up her hand before continuing, "We will use our magic if we cannot come up with a better solution."

We fall back into silence and Lucas uses the purple tentacle to turn the meat, he flips it, so the pink sides face the rock, revealing golden brown flesh. I swallow and try to focus on the task of how to approach the witch.

"It could be that our numbers made the situation worse," Tash suggests. "It could have been threatening."

Lexa nods. "I suspect you are right."

"She seemed very afraid that we would take her back to him," I say. "Maybe there is a way to reassure her that we are not there to take her to whoever he is."

Nathanial seems uneasy and leans forward on his knees. "I have a theory." He rubs his hand along his chin rubbing the stubble there. "I once worked in the palace, and I think I have seen her there before."

That piques my interest, I can see from the way heads snap to Nathanial that I am not the only one. No one says a word, afraid to interrupt this rare and sudden burst of sharing from the huge man.

He sighs and says, "It is possible that she is Empress Ageth. The first wife of Emperor Darkmor."

Tash drops her cup and rushes to pick it up. "You met her as the Empress?"

Nathanial shakes his head. "She was before my time at the place. Emperor Darkmor keeps a large portrait of her in his personal rooms. It is of a much younger woman of course, but I think it is her. It is not often there is a combination of dark skin and blue eyes like that, it also bears a striking resemblance. Empress Ageth was Darkmor's wife for about a decade ending around fifty years ago."

"You have been in Darkmor's personal rooms?" Lucas asks.

Nathanial levels him with an expression that could melt rock and says nothing. Lucas squirms under the huge man's death stare. It is obvious there will be no sharing outside of the requirements of understanding enough to get to the lightning witch.

"She looks like she fits the age bracket," Melissa adds.

"I believe I have heard of her," Lexa says, cutting through the awkward silence that still lingers as Nathanial stares at Lucas. "I have

heard the wife was in possession of a great power and bloodline. Darkmor felt both would lead to powerful heirs.”

“Yes,” Nathaniel grunts. “He discarded her when no living heir was had and moved on through a string of other wives. Even so, he seems to have a special affection for Empress Ageth, even after all these years and casting her aside.”

“Does she still have the title?” Tash asks.

Nathaniel nods. “He never revoked it or gave it to another.”

Tash smiles. “It sounds almost romantic.”

Nathaniel scoffs. “I find it unlikely. After having met five of his other wives I can say the commonality amongst all of them was that they hated him and were miserable.”

I swallow and I feel pain in my chest as I think of those women, I ask, “Did they have a choice to marry?”

Nathaniel meets my eyes and shakes his head. Nausea bubbles in my throat and I almost wish I hadn’t asked. A long silence settles over the group.

“If this is the same Ageth, perhaps this information can be useful,” Lexa finally says.

Melissa pulls a blanket out of her backpack and drapes it over her shoulders. “Well now that we know who ‘he’ is we could do better to reassure her.”

“We are also the ones fighting to overthrow him,” Tash adds. “That information is bound to have some effect.”

Burning flesh reaches my nose and Melissa points at the fire. “You’re burning dinner.”

Lucas snaps out of the thought he had been trapped in and hastily sets about turning the bird, these new sides are decidedly darker. He takes out his knife and cuts into it, clear juice flows out.

“It looks ready,” he announces.

We all take our share and what is left is wrapped up for tomorrow in a cloth. I find that my excitement for the bird has been dulled by the conversation. I look at the food on my makeshift plate and sigh. Lexa nudges my foot with hers and presses her leg against mine. I take a deep breath and focus on the contact for a moment, soothed by her nearness. Opening my eyes, I refocus on my food and work my way through it.

I can say I am not disappointed. I look up at Melissa with a smile. “This is much better than scorpion.”

She grins at me and takes a huge bite from the leg in her hand revealing the white flesh underneath the golden-brown skin. We work through our meal in silence, and I find as I move through my dinner it significantly cheers me.

Lexa sets her makeshift plate aside and stretches out. “With this new information, I feel we should try again to reason with Ageth in the morning. Perhaps knowing we are on the same side will add some clarity and stability to her thoughts.” She pauses before adding. “If that doesn’t work, we will use magic and do what we must to ensure the success of our mission.”

The group nods and with our bellies full, exhaustion from today’s long walk and terrifying events begins to settle over us. Lucas takes the second hide that I had left discarded on the floor and opens it up. It is probably big enough for two people to lay on but no more. He folds it in half and lays it beside the jutting rock he had been resting against near the fire.

Lucas prods the thick hide with his finger. “This should make the pair on watch more comfortable. We should do everything we can to keep the fire up I think.”

Melissa nods and lays down in the grass Lucas and I had created by the fire and says, “It will keep the cold at bay. Up here the temperatures could get to freezing and with this wind, it could cause problems for us.”

“Well, I already napped. I will take first watch,” I say. I move over to the hide and plop down on it and point at the fire. “Do I just feed this like a wood fire?”

Lucas stops halfway through pulling out his blanket and looks over at me. “Almost. Don’t stack too much in it. Perhaps one large bone at a time until it catches.”

I nod and Lexa comes to sit beside me on the thick hide, I notice her necklace isn’t around her neck and she shuffles closer, so our sides are flush. Already I feel the warmth improving in my body. Everyone piles as close to the fire as possible, even with the wind break and fire, the night is terribly cold and the gusts of wind that do make it around our makeshift wall are like ice.

The mumbles of goodnight wishes end and only the noise of the cavern and fire remain. Tash is curled up with Nathaniel, her chest to the fire and the big man lays behind her acting as a wind barrier. I smile. He really can be sweet in ways that are easily missed by others.

As the group settles into sleep, I feel Lexa's hand slip into mine and intertwine our fingers. I smile and squeeze back. We settle into a comfortable silence and begin our watch.

I wake after an uncomfortable sleep. Even with Lexa cuddled with me and under two blankets the night had been cold. I had woken up numerous times due to a strange noise or a cold rush of air. I sit wrapped in my blanket trying to warm my exhausted body and munching on cold bird and mushrooms for breakfast. The wind has died down significantly and I am bitter it didn't do so earlier. I had endured brutal cold during my time as a slave in the compound, but I am really struggling. My time in the rebel base and Travellers Haven has really softened me to the elements.

I finish the last of my food and wipe my hands as best I can on my pants to remove the grease from my fingers. The group is filled with nervous energy, and no one is looking forward to returning to the lightning witches garden for round two. We climb to our feet without a word and trudge back towards the glittering white path and the redbrick wall.

"Did anyone see anymore lightning last night?" Tash asks.

I shake my head. "We didn't."

"Or us," Melissa adds.

"Perhaps Ageth wore herself out and needed to recuperate," Lexa suggests as she pulls her water canteen from her bag and unstoppers it.

We are about to leave the cover of our rock formation and make the trip through the open plains between us and the lightning witches' immaculate path when Lucas changes direction and hurries over to a rock. Our group stops as he plays with the fungus there, scratching the tops, and checking the colour. He picks one, gives it a sniff and then hurriedly picks the cluster of mushrooms and packs them into his bag.

"What?" He asks as he turns to see us all staring. "It isn't easy to find food in this place and I am not fool enough to walk past it when it is right there."

Melissa nods. "Wiser words were never said."

We resume our walk and after an alarmingly short distance we are once again at the white path that leads to the red brick wall. I can see from here the twisted gate is still ajar. The early morning light seems to add a sinister gleam to everything. We hurry down the path and slip through the mangled gate and into a disaster zone. Whole sections of garden have been completely blasted apart. Deep groves in the black soil still smoulder with smatterings of torn up plants cast carelessly across them. The whole place smells acidic and the only thing I can attribute it to is the hot dirt near us.

The entire garden seems to be in this state. Sections of completely immaculate areas followed by a wave of almost total destruction. Only the house in the middle seems unscathed. The white path up ahead seems scuffed up in a weird way.

Melissa lets out a low whistle.

“Wow,” Tash remarks in almost a whisper. “I think we really upset her.”

“Upset who deary?” Comes a voice to the left of us.

I jump violently and turn to face Ageth, who is smiling sincerely up at us from where she is crouched by a group of plants she is trying to restore order to. We stare at her and the tension in the group is palpable.

“Did I give you a fright?” she asks with a look of concern. “I didn’t mean to listen in, but I couldn’t help it sitting right here and all.”

I blink and try to comprehend the very different woman on her knees in the dirt beside us.

“We were momentarily startled,” Lexa says smoothly. “Are you well?”

Ageth climbs to her feet and her hip and knee cracks loudly as she does so. “I’m getting too old to be on the ground like this,” she says with a grin. She turns to face the chaos of the gardens and adds, “I seem to have had a rough night though.”

We turn to look at the destroyed gardens and nod in agreement.

“Indeed,” Lexa replies. She hesitates and ventures, “Do you recall what happened?”

Ageth shakes her head. “I remember very little after I have had my medicine each night.” She wipes her hands on her apron. “I can see you are not guards. Which is a thankful relief. However, I must ask, why are you here?”

I can see Lexa’s shoulders tense from here. This is the moment.

She takes a breath. "We are on a mission to stop Darkmor."

Ageth stares at us. "The six of you?"

Lexa's hand twitches and I can see her thumb repeatedly rubbing her index finger. "Well, we have more support than us six alone. However, we are on a critical mission for the cause, and we believe you can help."

Ageth takes a long moment to look us over and she takes in our uncomfortable expressions. "You all seem very unnerved. I think you should leave." She raises her hand to point at the gate behind us, but Lucas noticeably flinches. Ageth raises an eyebrow and looks over the destruction around us.

"You came yesterday," she concludes.

"We did," Lexa replies. "You were." She pauses searching for a word. "Different."

Ageth runs a hand across her face and leaves a long smear of dirt. Her face looks tired and even the wrinkles seem exhausted.

Lexa takes a step forward. "We only wish to tell you our goals. If you still wish us to leave after that, we will go. We would like your support and to be friends."

Ageth's head snaps up. "Friends?" Lexa nods and Ageth steps onto the path and points at the blackened lines in the otherwise perfect white path. "Well, at least that explains something."

We move towards it and see the word 'friends' carved into the rocky path. Each of the giant letters blackened still smoking.

"When I woke to this today," Ageth says gesturing to the destruction. "All I could remember was something important happened." She looks at us. "Apparently that was you."

"We did not mean to give you the fright we did," Lexa said. "Things happened very quickly."

Ageth waves a hand at her. "Oh no don't fuss. I am sure I was quite unreasonable." She starts to walk down the path towards the house, and calls over her shoulder, "Can I tempt you with some biscuits?"

Nervous glances are cast and Lucas shuffles on the spot before whispering. "She seems very nice now. But I am still terrified of her."

Tash nods and I share their sentiments.

"What if this is a trap to lock us inside that building?" Nathaniel says in a low voice.

Lexa shakes her head. "After what we saw yesterday she is more than capable of forcing us to comply with her wishes without the need for deceit. I believe she has the potential to be even more adept at using her magic now that she seems more composed."

Ageth is almost at the door of her little house when she turns and calls back to us. "Come on dears, I don't bite."

Lexa starts down the path and the rest of us follow suit.

Nathanial puts his hand on the hilt of his sword and grumbles. "I am not worried about the bite."

Tash raises her hand to his arm and slides it down to rest on his hand. "It is okay. I think she is well now."

We reach the door and Ageth returns holding a platter of flat round biscuits. I look at them with interest. I have had biscuits many times in the compound. Usually, they are flavorless dry things that make you thirsty. They have a lot of vitamins and minerals packed into them and we were fed two every day amongst other, often less appealing items. These look nothing like those biscuits.

Ageth sees me looking and holds the platter out. "They are vanilla."

I take one of the biscuits from the plate and turn the soft biscuit in my hand. Under Ageth's watchful eye take a slow bite all the while hoping this isn't a trick, and if it is that my necklace can heal poison. The food is soft, sweet and full of flavour. My second bite is much more enthusiastic and when I don't keel over everyone else takes one.

Once we have all finished the offered food Ageth sits down on a chair beside her door. "Now, why are you here?"

Lexa looks around and seeing no other chairs sits on the ground. "We are looking for certain items that we believe can help us overthrow Darkmor."

Ageth stares at her for a long moment and finally states, "You want my necklace."

"Yes, we believe it is one of six we need to obtain," Lexa replies clasping her hands in her lap.

Ageth looks down at her, the wrinkles in her lined face so numerous they give her an ancient and wise look. She opens her mouth to reply and is thrown off track by a sudden violent burst of coughing. The cough causes her frame to shake, and she gasps for air, covering her mouth with a

blood-stained cloth. She sits back and takes in some long slow breaths before she returns her gaze to Lexa once more.

“Are you well?” Lexa asks. “Is there something I can get you?”

Ageth shakes her head and tucks the bloodied cloth back in her pocket.

“This power is no gift,” Ageth says sincerely. “It is a heavy burden, and it has done nothing more than bring me great suffering.”

I recall Edwards seizures. “Is it why you are sick?”

Ageth’s pale blue eyes come to rest on me. “It is. It has almost finished with me, I fear. I have taken to extreme measures to hold it back, but that won’t give me much longer.”

“The medicine?”

She nods. “It has certain, unpleasant side effects. Hallucinations and paranoia to name a few. But it has held off the illness for a time now.”

I nod thinking of my mother’s lingering cough and almost constant fevers. Do these necklaces make everyone sick?

I look at Ageth and ask, “What is your illness?”

She shakes her head. “I do not know. Something wrong grows within me. It used to just be in my stomach, but now it is everywhere. I feel the wrongness, the otherness of it keenly.”

“You are a Keeper.” Lexa says her voice a mixture of relief and disappointment. I can see her point. We still need to find the Xineoph, but at least it isn’t Ageth who doesn’t seem to have long.

“I am.” Ageth says. “I have great sympathy for your mission. Few have experienced the cruelty of Darkmor more than I. However, I cannot give the necklace to you.”

Lexa frowns and I can see her trying to formulate a response.

Ageth watches her in amusement for a moment before she turns to Tash, her aged voice crackling with the use of many years, “But I can give it to you.”

Chapter Twelve

“Me?” Tash asks her eyes wide, and she actually leans away a little.

Ageth nods and brushes a clump of dirt off her apron. “The necklace wants you. It has said so.”

I cast a nervous glance at Lexa recalling the way the witch had also thought the plants were talking last night before and how she had blasted them to smithereens with her lighting. Ageth seems to notice the look and smiles.

“It is okay dearies. I haven’t had my medicine yet today. I am in control of my faculties. When one has been in possession of a magical gem like this for eighty-seven years you learn to communicate with one another,” Ageth says.

My mouth drops as I look over Ageth. Eighty-seven! Even with the toll her illness has taken on her body I would not have guessed such an age. I cast my eyes over thick white hair and her lined face. Sure, she is a little stooped when she walks and has obvious difficulty getting up from the ground, but she is incredibly fit for her age. I have met fifty-year-olds that are not as fit as Ageth and I suspect if it had not been for her possession of the necklace she could have easily had another twenty years of life in her.

“Let me look at you,” Ageth demands, grabbing Tash’s chin and turning her so they can lock eyes. For a long moment neither of them blink and not a word is spoken as they stare at one another.

Finally, Ageth nods and sits back with a grin. “You are a Xineoph and not another Keeper.” She smiles and claps her hands together bringing them to her chest. “Oh, how nice it is to see my life’s work conclude on such a pivotal moment.”

“How can you know Tash is the Xineoph?” Lucas asks flicking his eyes between the two women. “We haven’t performed the spell.”

Ageth looks at him and turns her head slightly to the side. “I already told you. The gem and I can communicate. It told me. The gem most certainly can tell the difference between a Xineoph and a Keeper.”

“How do you communicate with the gem?” I ask.

“I listen,” she replies offhandedly.

I frown. She makes it sound so easy. I reach up to where my necklace hangs and grasp the gem through my shirt.

“Hello?” I try inside my head.

I feel the slight buzzing of a headache coming on and nothing more. Something catches Ageth’s attention, and she looks at me for a long moment. Her light blue eyes and white hair standing out vividly against the dark colour of her skin. Her eyes flick to Lexa and Lucas and I have a feeling she is putting pieces together. She has a clever mind. She must have been brilliant in her youth.

Her eyes come back to me. “You are different,” She states flicking her eyes between us. “All three of you.” Her eyes come back to me. “But especially you.”

I nod and after a moment’s hesitation I pull my necklace from my shirt and the blue gem sparkles brightly. The yellow gem around Ageth’s neck sparkles back and it is almost like they are greeting each other after eons apart.

“We are trying to stop him,” I say as the gem twinkles in my fingers.

Ageth’s face is positively gleaming. “Two Xineophs! Oh! I never thought I would meet one in my lifetime let alone two.”

There is a long silence and finally I venture. “Four.”

“Four?” Ageth asks slowly. Lexa and Lucas reveal their necklaces and tears fill Ageth’s eyes. She lets out a big sniff and pulls the bloodied cloth from her pocket and blows her nose before returning it.

She looks back at me and gives me a once over. “You must be Taliah’s,” she says matter of factly.

I stare at her. I almost wish Ageth had been the first Keeper we had discovered. She has given us the answer to questions that took us months of research to solve. I cannot wait to see what else she knows.

“Well, I will not delay you any more than I already have.”

With that, Ageth delicately slips the necklace from around her neck, fingers gently cradling the twinkling yellow gem. As she gazes at it, a sad smile crosses her face, and she closes her eyes for a long moment. Time seems to slow as light radiates through her fingers, casting a gentle glow on her aged face. A single tear escapes her closed eyes and tracks a glistening trail down her cheek. Tears prickle the back of my eyes and as I watch the moment, I cannot help but feel she is saying goodbye to a

beloved friend. Another tear falls from Ageth as she opens her eyelids and her features brim with raw emotion. Her hand extends towards Tash offering the necklace as a precious gift. The gesture is laden with unspoken meaning, the passing of something dear and cherished.

Tash wipes her face and reaches out, carefully taking the gem in her fingers. As she pulls the chain from Ageth's hand the older woman's fingers twitch, like she might close them and prevent the passing of her friend to another. But the chain falls from her fingers without a fight and now sits in the palm of Tash's hand. As I watch, it lets out a small shimmer of yellow light. Tash sniffs again and aggressively wipes her eyes. She pauses and frowns at the necklace glittering in her hand.

"It is almost like it is saying something," she says uncertainly as she brings the necklace closer to her face to inspect it. "It is weirdly muffled. But I can almost hear words."

Ageth smiles at Tash and the gem, and says, "it takes time to hear each other, but it will come. Have patience and keep listening."

Tash nods and a long silence fills the space around us.

It takes long moments before Ageth clears her voice and the brisk tone I had become accustomed to returns. "Now would be a good time to connect them don't you think?" She says, her eyes locking on to mine.

Startled by the in-depth knowledge she seems to have about the process I turn to Tash. "Are you ready? Touching you will activate your gem fully and it will be a lot at first."

"What is going to happen?" Tash asks hesitantly.

I shrug. "I don't know."

"Is it dangerous?" Nathaniel asks his voice laced with a rare tinge of concern.

"Well, I suppose it could be," I say slowly. "However, our magic so far has only hurt us through prolonged use, and we are safe here and can stop anytime."

Tash looks back at the necklace for a long moment and finally loops it around her neck. "Okay," she says and holds out her hand.

Hesitation builds in my stomach as I reach out. It is hard to feel affection for something when it hurts you as often as my necklace hurts me. I do not usually enjoy the experience.

I grasp Tash's hand and an explosion of radiant yellow and shimmering blue light erupts from our necklaces. Its brightness is so

intense that we are momentarily blinded as the light envelops our surroundings in its shimmering glow. Tash's eyes widen, her gaze fixed on her necklace. Taking a steadying breath Tash closes her eyes, reaching out for the broken pot beside her. She takes the two halves and pushes them together, their jagged halves coming together with a soft clink.

A wound opens up on each of our hands, but Tash is so focused on her task she doesn't seem to notice. She touches her finger to the long crack between the two parts and a long yellow and blue line traverses the path of the crack and fuses the two halves. When she removes her hand, the pot is whole again, its jagged scars the only indication of its brutal past.

I raise my eyebrows. I hadn't seen that coming, it is very different from the other magics we had used. Tash turns to me and opens her eyes and I jump back but she holds my hand fast. Her eyes are the same colour as her gem. Bright yellow streams from them and the usual grey eyes are gone.

"It is okay Claire," she says, another long yellow line opening across her forehead. I watch in disbelief as she doesn't even flinch. "The gem is talking to me, it told me what to do," she says and lets go of my hand.

The colour around us fades and Tash's eyes return to normal. She blinks and then her hand suddenly snaps to her face. "Ouch," she says as she gingerly touches the magical wound there.

She looks at the one on her hand and reaches out to touch it to. She frowns and draws her hand away. "Why is it so cold?"

Driven by curiosity, I reach out and touch the wound on her hand. Colours burst around us again, but this time, icy coldness grips my hand as I touch her magical wound, the sensation stings with an unexpected intensity. Recoiling in surprise, I hastily retract my hand and tuck it into the warmth of my shirt.

"That is cold," I agree, the frigid touch of the magical wound lingering on my fingertips even now.

Nathanial shuffles awkwardly behind us and finally kneels behind Tash, scoops her in his arms pulling her towards his chest and she effortlessly folds into the hug.

"Are you okay?" He murmurs.

She nods and buries her head under his chin.

I politely turn away. Nathanial isn't good at public displays of affection. What just happened must have really scared him.

Lucas picks up the pot and turns it in his hands. "Well, that is awesome. I wonder what else she can fix?"

Melissa takes the pot and inspects it closely. "I thought when Claire used her magic with someone it did healing things? Like Lucas's plant thingy and the bubble?"

Lucas shrugs. "I guess fixing things is a kind of healing."

That sort of makes sense. As long as you look at the idea of healing broadly.

Lexa moves beside me and takes my hand, rubbing it with the back of her thumb. Her eyes glance over my arms and face, lingering on the magical wounds. "Are you okay?" she asks.

I nod. "I guess there is no way to reduce the cost of your magic if you have no idea what is going to happen."

Lexa smiles. "I would expect not."

Ageth claps loudly. "Absolutely brilliant!" she says ecstatically. Her enthusiasm launches her into another series of brutal coughs. Her small frame rattles violently with each cough and I can see it makes her shake worse.

She recovers and turns to us still wheezing. "It is really happening, isn't it? You really are trying to stop him?"

"That is what we hope to achieve," Lexa replies.

"Well then," Ageth says slapping her thighs. "Tonight, we shall talk and feast. You will tell this old woman all about how you are going to achieve the greatest wish of her life before she dies."

I grit my teeth to hear Ageth talk of herself like that. But with the severity of that booming cough, she might not be wrong.

Lucas looks positively panicked. "I don't know if we should be here tonight," he says hesitantly.

Ageth looks at him confused for a moment before a smile slides onto her face. "Oh deary. I don't need to take that awful medicine anymore." She gestures to Tash who is still safely encased in Nathaniel's arms. "My job is complete, and I no longer need to extend my painful experience."

My shoulders tense and I venture, "I could try to heal you?"

Ageth's gaze turns towards me, her expression a mixture of astonishment and curiosity. "It is a generous offer, but the toll on your body would be horrendous. Even if it wasn't, I would refuse. My time here is almost done, and I still reserve the dignity to decide when it ends."

I nod and I feel guilty at the relief that floods through me. I had known that the impact on me would be severe if I had attempted. But what I gather of Ageth's life is that it was a string of suffering and I feel compelled to help.

Ageth heads inside her leather home and beckons us inside. I rise to my feet and follow her through the metal doorway, and I am surprised to find the space inside is actually quite large. The room I am in is the centre and it domes around a fireplace which burns gently, letting out a soothing crackle as it dispels the cold air from the room. Nathanial carries Tash over to it and places her by the fire.

A small stone table stands proudly in the centre of the room, its smooth marbled surface is expertly made and it looks flawless. Another room to the left has a raised bed with luxurious looking blankets and cushions placed neatly on top. There are curtains of hide bunched in the corner between the room I am in and the one to the left. It looks as if it can be pulled across to seal off the room. Another room to the side is much smaller and looks to be a food storage area. I can see sacks of grain, meat hanging from the roof and leather bags that bulge in shelves all the way around the perimeter of the room.

It would seem Ageth has everything she needs to live comfortably here. She shuffles over to the table, her back slightly hunched and I can see her uneven movements are pained.

I hurry over and ask, "Is there something I can help with?"

Ageth turns to me and smiles. "If you could head into the pantry and find anything you would like to have in a stew and bring it here that would be wonderful, dear."

I try to fight down the smile that emerges on my face and I hurry into the pantry. Lexa follows behind me and together we peek inside leather sacks and woven bags.

"What do you think of Ageth?" Lexa asks.

I pull my head out of a bag full of smooth white vegetables of some kind. "She seems sad. Like she has suffered much and has never been able to find a sense of peace."

Lexa nods. "She is very different from the woman we met last night."

"Do you think it really was her medicine that made her behave that way?" I say as I lift a large leg of meat from a hook on the ceiling. The

heavy hunk of meat has been preserved somehow and there is a strong smoky smell that accompanies it.

“It is possible,” Lexa says collecting arm loads of the smooth white vegetable I had looked at earlier. “I know of many plants and fungus that could cause that kind of erratic reaction. Some really do make people see, hear, and believe things that are not present in the room.”

“Are any of them medicinal?”

Lexa shakes her head. “Not that I know of. With side effects such as those, it would have to be a serious ailment to consider such a treatment.”

I nod and pick up a small bag filled with long purple leaves. “She seems very sick.”

“Coughing blood is never a good sign,” Lexa agrees.

“I think she really means to help us,” I say, eyeballing a very slimy looking vegetable.

Lexa pauses with her arms full of vegetables and says, “She has passed to us the only means to protect herself from the dangers outside these walls and those who wish her harm. It would take great faith in us and our mission to hand over that necklace. It leaves her very vulnerable. I believe we can trust her as she has trusted us.”

Lexa always phrases things so elegantly. I smile and reply, “I agree.”

Catching my smile Lexa raises her eyebrow and asks, “Ready to head back?”

“Yep,” I say struggling to keep all the food balanced in my arms.

We move back towards Ageth and unload our collection on the table.

Ageth looks at the pile and shakes her head and says, “That is not enough for a feast.”

We look back at the pile and I cannot help but think it is already a lot of food to be taking from her stores.

Ageth turns to Melissa and Lucas and says, “Go to the pantry and grab some food.”

The two look at the huge pile of food already on the table and up at Lexa who nods for them to follow Ageth’s instructions while Lexa and I set about cutting up the vegetables and starting to prepare the meal.

Ageth nods and turns to Nathaniel. “You are a burly young fellow. Out behind the hut to the left is a big cauldron the guards usually use when they are here to prepare their food. Please lift it for me onto the tripod you will find out the back, we will need it for our stew.”

Nathanial rises and heads towards the door. “Deary,” Ageth adds. “There is a second much larger cauldron in the distance. Leave it alone and stay well away from it. I will tell you about it later. It is very dangerous, and we must come up with a plan for it.”

Nathanial pauses uncertain and after a long moment turns to do her bidding. Melissa and Lucas return from the pantry with armloads of food and begin to help prepare it, Ageth looks over the larger pile and nods. She grabs a long green vegetable with her withered hand and begins slicing it with a knife. Her movements are precise and smooth. She very quickly outpaces us and very likely cuts up most of the vegetables.

Tash comes to hover beside us, unsure of what to do. Ageth catches sight of her and smiles. “How are you feeling dear?”

“I feel tired. A little confused. It is like a voice I can almost hear but not quite.” Tash replies.

Ageth nods. “It will come.” She gives Tash a once over and says, “Please go tell your man that there is a large sack of coal beside where he found the pot. It would be good if the two of you could spread it under the cauldron and prepare to light it.”

Tash nods and hurries off to find Nathanial. Soon even the huge chunk of meat has been cut up and Ageth passes us large wooden bowls. We follow her lead and scoop the sliced foods into our bowls and follow her hobbling form outside. We walk around the side of Ageth’s house and around to the back. I am surprised to see there are rows of tents here. In the centre of the tents are Tash and Nathanial who rise to their feet and wipe their sooty hands on a cloth that looks like it has been used for exactly that many times.

“Thank you,” Ageth says and gives Nathanial a long appraising look.

Nathanial shifts uncomfortably and Ageth smiles as she tips the contents of her bowl into the giant pot. “What I wouldn’t have given to have had a burly man like you when I was young.”

Nathanial’s dark cheeks show the flush around his stubble as he shifts awkwardly on his feet. “Uhh. Thank you?”

Ageth turns to Tash and says, “With a beau like that, you will be the envy of many.”

It is Tash’s turn to grow a crimson blush across her cheeks.

“We need water,” Ageth says and points to a metal pump system not too far from us. It is very similar to the one I had seen Lexa use back in

the growing rooms of the rebel base. That moment seems like so long ago. I try not to get lost in the thought as Lucas and Melissa set their bowls of food down and head towards it to collect the water.

Lexa and I take on the task of adding all the food to the cauldron. When I tip the last bowl in, I marvel at the mix of vegetables and meat inside the pot. It looks like it could feed at least fifteen people. More if you stretched it out with a lot of water.

With a determined, yet laborious effort, Ageth shuffles over to a collection of metal propped against the nearby wall. She carefully lifts one, her movements strained by the weight. For a brief moment she struggles with a latch, but it shifts and folds out into a functioning chair. I hurry over and collect some as Ageth begins to carry the chair to the fire. I struggle with the chair for a minute before I manage to make it unfold. I quickly unfold another and carry two at a time back to the fire. Lexa sees what I am doing and helps. Ageth deposits her chair and turns back to collect another.

I drop my chairs with a loud clatter and say, "It's okay. I will get the last two."

Ageth begins to cough and nods sitting down in the chair she had just brought over. I hurry to get the last two chairs before Ageth can recover and decide an eighty-five-year-old woman should be carrying around heavy chairs while there is a bunch of able bodied twenty to thirty somethings about.

When I return, Melissa is pouring two buckets of water into the pot. The two pots fill it halfway and she turns and yells back to Lucas. "One more should do it!"

Lucas nods, stops pumping the metal handle and stoops to pick up the bucket at his feet. He tips in the bucket and Ageth sits back resting in her chair watching us work together as she catches her breath. Lexa stoops and using her flint, lights the charcoal stacked below the dinner pot. The wooshes as the flames chase each other from coal to coal. The coal is so efficient I can feel the heat already licking the cold from my limbs.

Suddenly with nothing to do I shift awkwardly and sit down on the edge of a seat. Even through my leather pants I can feel how cold it is. I look at my hands and I realise how dirty I am. I try to wipe the worst of it off, but it doesn't really help.

Ageth seems to notice and shifts in her chair. "You need a wash."

My cheeks heat up. "I have been travelling for some time now."

Ageth nods and points back to the house. "There is a small room off my bedroom. In there is a shower, you may use it."

"What is a shower?" I ask.

Ageth raises an eyebrow. "You have never been into the city, have you?"

"Only a few times, under guard and on display. I never seen the inside of any buildings." I say. "Before I escaped, I spent almost all my time in the compound and the arena."

Ageth's face falls. "I am sorry to hear that dear. A shower is place where you wash yourself. When you turn the taps, water comes out."

Lexa leans in. "You have plumbing?"

Ageth nods. "It is all self-sustained from a magical spring. There is another pump like that one. When the guards come once a month, they pump it and refill the shower tank for me. One of the pipes has a chamber for a special crystal in the wall and the water is even heated." Ageth takes in Lexa's face and adds, "You may all use it."

I cast a glance at Lexa, wishing she could come with me. My heart rate quickens at the thought of a few minutes alone together.

I rise to my feet. "Thank you Ageth."

She nods and returns her gaze to the fire. "Lexa, perhaps you can go with Claire and bring back my brass teapot?"

Lexa jumps to her feet and says, "Of course."

"It is in one of the cupboards. It may take a while to find." Ageth says with a smile.

I narrow my eyes at the comment. She seems particularly delighted with herself for some reason. Perhaps she is just finally getting more comfortable with the idea of asking for help.

We hurry together back around the house and through the door. The moment I walk in my eyes land on the brass teapot by the fireplace. Suddenly I am pressed up against the metal door that shuts with a muffled clank as my back meets it and my sword clatters against the metal. Lexa is pressed up against me and her mouth on mine as she kisses me with such a burning intensity that has me like a puddle at her feet. I grasp at her waist and pull at her desperately. Wanting nothing more than to be uninterrupted for a time.

She breaks away, takes my hand, and leads me towards the bedroom. My heart pounds in my chest and a tightness coils in my belly as we walk past the bed and into the room with the shower. Unlike the leather and hide that envelop the rest of Ageth's dwelling, this particular room has solid walls made of dense, dry mud. Its surface has been meticulously smoothed, lending a sense of permanence to the space. In the corner of the room is two metal handles and a spout of some sort.

Lexa takes my hand. "It is not a river. But perhaps you could accompany me. To ensure no harm befalls me?"

A smile pulls at the corner of my mouth. "As you saved me from drowning in the birthing grounds, it would seem I am indebted to you and duty bound to return the favour."

Lexa raises her hands to her fastenings and starts to undo them one at a time. With a smile she says, "Duty bound?"

My mouth is suddenly dry, and I watch the moment of Lexa's hands with such an overwhelming sense of anticipation. I lick my lips and say, "It is perhaps not as selfless as it sounds."

She pulls the leather armour from her shoulders and drops it in the corner of the room, revealing the dark singlet she has underneath. Her tanned arms flex as she grabs the bottom of her singlet and slowly lifts it. Giving me just the slightest glimpse of the well-defined muscle under it.

After a moment of what feels like prolonged torture, she lifts the shirt off and throws it in the growing pile by the door. Without a word, she turns in her pants and chest bindings to turn the taps. Water pours from the spout in a sprinkling stream, steam begins to bubble up from where the water meets the ground before it trails towards the drain. Lexa holds her hand under it checking the temperature, she fiddles with the taps until she smiles and shakes her hand dry. She undoes the fastening of her pants and slides them down her long legs, revealing more skin than my brain knows how to handle.

She throws them too in the pile and gives me a wicked grin. "Are you just going to stand there?"

Something clicks in my brain, and I quickly strip my clothes. I am aware it cannot be as tasteful as what Lexa has just done. Especially as my foot gets stuck in my pants and I have to awkwardly hop on the spot to untangle myself. When I add my clothes to the pile and stand only in my undergarments, I catch Lexa staring at me with a hungry expression. She

closes the distance and presses me up against the cool wall, kissing me hard. Her hands are everywhere, gripping and tugging in a way that pulls the breath from me.

Her mouth moves down to my neck as her hands fumble at the wrap around my chest. I twist and try to tug at her bindings, surprisingly the loop comes free easily and with shaking hands I unravel it. Lexa isn't far behind with mine and within a few moments, we are both free.

I pull her close and kiss her deeply, revelling in the way our skin meets almost uninterrupted. Lexa steps back, slides off her underwear and moves into the falling water. I scramble to follow her and I step under with her. The water is delightfully warm, and the pounding pressure loosens tension I didn't know I had been holding in my shoulders.

Lexa takes a white bar from a shelf I hadn't noticed before and rubs it in her hands until a lather forms on them. She slowly takes my arm and rubs the bubbles onto it, working slowly and rhythmically, rubbing away the grime and massaging the muscles gently as she goes. She turns me and repeats the action on my back, the way her fingers tickle across my skin causes a wave of goosebumps that has nothing to do with the temperature.

"Is this okay?" She whispers in my ear, her breath warm and making me weak at the knees.

"Yes," I breathe as her hands slip to my waist and she presses up against my back.

I can feel everywhere our bodies meet and it is like every one of those feelings is rushing to my stomach, pooling there and building into something I am not sure I will be able to hold back for much longer. Hands travel across my stomach running along the flesh there, alluring and taunting all the same time. I feel the momentary pause as Lexa's hands reach the hand length scar near my belly button that I had gained in one of my first Arena matches. The fingers linger tenderly for a moment before they move on, leaving bubbles in their wake. Kisses are placed along my shoulder as Lexa trails soap along my skin.

I turn and Lexa stops immediately, lifting her hands from my body and her eyes are questioning. I smile and lean in for a kiss, she relaxes and resumes her torturous mapping of my back. When we break apart, I pick up the white block and rub it on my hands. Bubbles appear and I rub my hands across Lexa's collar bones and shoulders, I work my way down her arms, marvelling in the softness of her skin and the strength of her body.

My fingertips encounter many raised scars. I manoeuvre Lexa under the warm spray and move behind her, her bronze skin marred by three long white scars that travel from her left shoulder to the middle of her back. I smooth my palm over the rough skin and place a gentle kiss there. I slide my arms around her waist and hold her close. Lexa leans back into me and for long moments we just stand under the water spray.

“We should finish washing,” Lexa says regretfully. “Before there is no water left for anyone else.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I ask playfully.

Lexa turns and smiles. “Claire,” she says in a low voice that sends a rush of excitement through me. She runs her fingers down my arms. “There are better places for this to go further.”

I cannot help the disappointment that falls across my face and I nod accepting her words even if my body screams at me not to.

Lexa runs her hand across my cheek and says, “Like the tents we will be sleeping in tonight.”

A smile splits across my face and I lean in for another kiss. “Later then?”

Lexa smiles. “Later.”

Chapter Thirteen

We head back to the group tea pot in hand, the handle is still warm from being by the fireplace and the water sloshes against the metal as I walk. I try hard to battle the broad smile that keeps trying to split my face as I recall what we had been doing only minutes before. I look at Lexa and such a warm surge of affection washes over me. Melissa looks at us suspiciously and I quickly force my face into something more neutral.

“You two were gone for ages.” Melissa says, her eyes flick over our wet hair and wiped down clothing. “Why are you both wet?”

I feel heat fly to my cheeks and even Lexa seems slightly lost for words. Water trickles down my neck and I cannot help but think why we didn’t realise how strange it would be for Lexa to come back clean and wet when she was meant to be searching for a tea pot.

Ageth waves her hand. “Why they showered of course.” She turns to us and wraps her lumpy hands in her lap. “I put the tea pot some place strange didn’t I dears?”

I frown as I recall the tea pot sitting by the fireplace. When we had collected it the stone underneath had been worn giving me the impression the pot had always lived there.

“You did,” Lexa agrees with Ageth, following her cover.

Ageth’s eyes twinkle and she taps her head with a finger. “This old brain isn’t what it used to be.”

I glance at Lexa who smiles back and places the pot by the fire to warm. If this is Ageth’s brain just as a shadow of what it used to be, she must have been formidable in her youth. I try to think back to my interactions with Lexa. I don’t think we had been obvious about our relationship.

I sit down in one of the empty chairs and watch as Tash stirs the stew, the long bone spoon clanking the sides of the pot. It smells wonderful and I can already feel my hunger building. It has got to be close to lunch time.

Ageth shifts more comfortably in the chair and rubs her hands together. “So, what is the plan to put an end to Darkmor?”

Silence descends our group as small side conversations fade to a stop. I share a glance with Lexa, what kind of plan is Ageth expecting? This

whole quest has been a disaster from start to present. Nothing that happened could have been planned for because most of it is so bizarre that I never would have guessed I would be faced with it.

I look around and venture, "We find the other two necklaces."

"Do you know who has the necklaces or where they are?" Ageth asks with a smile.

"Umm," I say and fidget with my fingers. "We have a spell that will help us find them on a map."

Ageth nods her smile fading and asks, "Then?" She looks at me with such intensity that I feel guilty for not having an answer.

Lexa leans forward and places her elbows on her knees linking her hands together. "We haven't planned past that. Any information you have that you think might be helpful would be invaluable."

Ageth sits back and ponders us a few minutes. "You are winging it aren't you?"

I share a glance with Melissa who says, "We tried to make a plan and it was obliterated before we even had a chance to set it in motion."

"We have been running screaming from place to place since then," Lucas adds.

Tash nods and pushes her hair out of her face. "I didn't even know I was a Xineoph until today."

"We have been learning as we go and doing our best to proceed with the mission. We may not have a plan, but we have a goal and that has worked for us so far," Lexa concludes.

Ageth's mouth is open and her eyes flit from face to face. "This is either destiny or you lot are the luckiest group of people I have ever met."

"It does seem to work out in our favour more than it doesn't," I say as I stare into the fire and consider her words.

Lucas pushes his glasses up his nose and smiles. "Someone should write a book about our fumbling attempts to save our world once this is over."

Melissa shakes her head. "Who would want to read that?"

Lucas looks indignant. "We are making history. Lots of people will read it."

Ageth clears her throat and Melissa and Lucas end what I'm sure would have been a very amusing argument.

“Once you have the necklaces, how do you plan to get near enough to Darkmor to use them?” Ageth asks. “Do you know anything about him?”

Everyone shakes their heads except Nathanial who looks uncomfortable. He shifts in his chair which creaks loudly under his enormous, muscled weight.

Ageth sees his uncertainty and pounces. “You are a big burly fellow. Certainly Darkmor’s preferred type, did he choose you for service?”

Nathanial sets his jaw and remains silent. I can basically see the mental walls slam up around him. It is weird. I hadn’t realised those walls had come down so much since I met him. But in this moment, I am reminded of how he was when we first met.

Ageth nods. “I see it is still fresh.” She looks at him for a long moment with sad eyes. “Do not hold it alone for too long. Holding on to some things only bitters our soul and wears us to the bone until we can bear it no longer.” She looks around at our little group and adds, “You may be surprised at who is willing to help you carry your burden if you only choose to open up.”

Nathanial’s hands fist so tightly his knuckles go white and I can see even from here he is digging his nails into his palms. I look at the ground. I have used that trick many times when I have been too afraid to cry.

A long moment of silence goes by before Ageth says, “My wounds are not so fresh and I have had many, many years to turn that pain into a pattern of revenge plotting that borders on the compulsive side. I would be delighted to offer some thoughts and insights.”

“Are you Empress Ageth?” Lucas bursts.

Ageth shakes her head. “I always hated that title. It was stolen and never mine to have. While I am descended of royalty it was long ago and there were purer lines than mine.”

“Royalty?” I ask.

Ageth nods. “I am descended from King Kent’s son, Malek, as is Tash.”

Tash’s head snaps up. “I’m what?”

Ageth tilts her head. “You must be of his line for the necklace to have chosen you. That is how it works. They do not usually choose at random.”

“We are related?” Tash asks.

I look over Ageth’s dark skin and Tash’s pale skin. Even now in Ageth’s old age she is taller than Tash. Time has stooped her a little, but in

her prime I can see she would have been quite tall. Even their face shape is very different.

Ageth nods. "Somewhere at some point, yes."

Lucas leans forward. "Does this mean I am related to Edward?"

Ageth raises an eyebrow. "I have absolutely no idea who that is. But as you have a purple necklace, if you received it from him than yes."

I smile. I can see that family resemblance.

Ageth continues. "Only the green and red hop from person to person without a line. But even they are selective."

"Selective how?" Lexa asks.

Ageth's eyes fall to the necklace now hanging around Lexa's neck. "The green gem only selects strong leaders who have strong ideals, and think of others before themselves."

"And the red?" I ask.

Ageth smiles. "It only ever selects the pure of heart. Someone who has much reason to hate and still feels their love to be their driving motivation."

"Can you predict what their powers will be?" Lexa asks.

Ageth shakes their head. "Nope. The gems do what they want. Some say it is closely linked with the persons deepest desire and I suppose it could be true." She pauses to watch the flickering flames. "My power was never something I wanted and the use of it has brought me great illness and suffering."

"Maybe it works different for Xineoph's?" Melissa suggests, expertly flipping a knife through her fingers.

Ageth shrugs. "Perhaps."

Tash once again rises to stir the stew and we all watch her complete her task in silence. When she returns to her seat, she shuffles it closer to Nathaniel. Not quite touching the extremely tense man, but certainly in his space.

"Can you tell us anything helpful about Darkmor?" Lexa asks, shifting her chair closer to the fire as the wind picks up.

Ageth pauses for a moment. "He is deluded. He honestly believes everything he has done is the benefit the human race. On many occasions he claimed he was saving us."

"Saving us?" I repeat stunned. "He actually believes that?"

Ageth nods. "Right to the very core of that twisted black heart of his." She tucks her hands into the deep pockets of her apron. "He is very gifted with magic. He even taught me how to use mine, believing that if my gift with magic was truly refined before I conceived, that it would improve the chances of his offspring being magical."

"Can you teach us to use ours?" Tash asks.

Ageth shakes her head. "I could not possibly bring myself to replicate his unsavoury methods."

My nose crunches at the sentence and I very much doubt I want to know any more on the topic. Ageth sits silently for a long time staring into the fire lost in thought.

"Why didn't he take your gem?" Nathaniel asks in his deep voice.

"He cannot touch it." Ageth says. "Taliah The Great's magic was so pure and unfiltered when she created the gems fighting The Collector, that someone with that much ill intent cannot touch it."

"Goblins once took my necklace," Lexa says quietly.

Ageth shakes her head. "It is not the same. The goblins were just being goblins. They have an affinity for shiny things and see it as a symbol of status. I very much doubt they even knew what they had."

Lexa nods and fidgets with her hands. I shuffle my foot closer, so our boots are touching, and she sends me a small smile.

"Do you know of any weaknesses?" Melissa asks.

Ageth thinks for a long moment. "First would be the idea he will fail and disappoint his long dead master. Second is easily vanity, he cares far too much for how he looks." She takes a long deep breath before saying. "And the last would be me."

Nathaniel nods in agreement. "When I last saw him, he was still very much obsessively in love with you."

Ageth grimaces. "Yes. I assure you. I never did anything to encourage it. Even now he sends ridiculously expensive gifts." She gestures at the crushed shells at our feet. "This came last winter. The Phoenix must know how many lost their lives bringing it up that mountain." She rubs her face aggressively. "It is amazing that he thinks it love when he imprisons someone and doesn't allow them to leave."

Heaviness sinks in my stomach as I remember the mountain pass is sealed. "The way up is sealed now," I say. "I am not sure how we are going to get back down."

Ageth looks stunned. "The way up the mountain is closed?"

I nod. "One of the earthquakes created by the sky rocks caused it to collapse."

Lucas scratches his chin. "I forgot we are trapped."

"There must be another way down," Melissa says, there isn't usually just one way when it comes to natural formations."

Ageth shakes her head. "This isn't a natural formation. This was created by The Collector to imprison his fiercest opponents and largest threat to him taking power here."

"Is this another name for Darkmor?" Tash asks.

"No. The Collector was before Darkmor," Ageth says quietly. "Darkmor has not always been in charge. The way history tells it, things have actually dramatically improved since Darkmor took over." Ageth pauses staring into the flames. "It is important to remember Darkmor had that history written and it could be heavily tarnished."

"Who was the fierce enemy?" Lexa asks. "They could be a benefit to our cause if we could build a diplomatic relationship with them."

Ageth considers her for a moment. "It is possible, but there aren't many left. Darkmor set what remained free of this place, and enslaved them some time before he placed me here. Have you heard of the queltons?"

Silence meets her words and only the crackling of the flames on the coal and the wind whistling through the mountain peaks fill it. This place kept the queltons trapped? I recall Miss Q saying she had the memories of her ancestors, perhaps this is why she was so adamant she would not come with us to the mountain.

"This place kept the queltons trapped?" Lucas asks. "It doesn't seem possible, why didn't they just zip by the mountain pass and leave?"

"The spiders and the bats were put in the mountain pass to keep them trapped." Ageth replies. "A single bat could kill a quelton. The venom they have to mask their bites is toxic, the spiders are also specialised quelton predators. It doesn't matter how fast one is. Once a quelton is trapped in a net, it isn't going anywhere."

"What did they eat up here?" Melissa asks. "I haven't found very much."

Ageth shrugs. "My best guess would be scorpions. But there wasn't enough, and their population went from a few thousand, to less than fifty

in ten seasons.”

“That is horrible,” I say, trying very hard to stop my brain from trying to imagine some of those horrific scenarios.

“It is barbaric,” Lexa says quietly, staring at her hands. I can see even from here that they shake with anger and disgust.

I shift my chair closer to her and put my arm around her back. She leans in immediately, taking the offered comfort. Ageth looks at us with a small smile and my stomach twists. Okay, maybe we hadn’t been as low key as I thought. Thankfully our group is used to our high levels of affection and haven’t put the pieces together yet.

“Stress no more about a way down today,” Ageth says waving her hand. “I will think on it.”

“Ageth,” I say slowly a thought building. “Do you know a way out of Shadowsoul?”

Ageth seems surprised. “I would assume it is the same way we came in. When I was first captured sixty years ago in the very first wave of human enslavement, we were brought down a narrow and winding path in the forbidden zone.” Ageth mistakes our silence and adds. “It was very dangerous, we lost about half our number on the trip and around a third of the goblins accompanying us.”

Lexa’s head snaps up and she enters full leader mode. “You have been in the forbidden zone?”

Ageth seems surprised by the sudden transformation. “Yes, it is how I got here. Well, me, my younger sister, and around forty others after we finally cleared the zone.”

“Is the path easy to find?” Lexa asks.

Ageth thinks on it for a moment. “If you walk for about a day towards the coast, you will begin to see the cavern wall. It took us a very long time to get out of the zone. Goblins aren’t the fastest walkers and we also had children with us.”

Lexa leans forward. “How long?”

Ageth rubs her forehead. “If I had to have a guess, maybe a month. We had to keep going around things. It was the first trip and I get a sense that even the goblins didn’t really know the way.”

“Did you encounter beasts?”

Ageth nods. “Yes. A great variety, I almost lost my sister Eldri to one and it was only that it was distracted by another beast that she got away.”

“Eldri?” I ask, thinking of the elders.

Ageth nods and looks at the ground sadly. “It almost would have been better if the beast had taken her. What she had to endure under Darkmor was much worse. He tortured her until I gave in and agreed to marry him. He kept her barely alive so he could use her as a threat every time I misbehaved or resisted in some way.”

“That is appalling,” Melissa remarks as she takes one of her many knives out and begins sharpening it.

“Your sister,” I say. “Can she hear loud thoughts?”

Ageth’s face freezes and the moment is long and tense before she finally ventures, “You have met Eldri?” I nod and she speeds on. “Is she still alive? I thought Darkmor had killed her,” She tugs at her hair and says in anguish, “It is the only reason I left.”

“Eldri is alive, we rescued her and others,” Lexa says gently. “She is currently at one of our bases, I can arrange for you to reunite.”

Ageth’s face splits into such a hopeful grin. “Thank you, you have given me reason to continue living. I honestly hadn’t planned to do so once you left.”

An awkward stillness settles over the group as no one is sure how to respond. At Ageth’s age, it would certainly be her choice if she chose to end what must be a very painful suffering with her condition. But at the same time, she is such a brilliant mind and human that it would be a shame to see her taken.

Ageth rises to her feet and lets out such a deep hacking cough that she has to sit again. Once it is over, she is left panting in her chair, and she looks at us apologetically. “It would seem I got a little over excited.”

“You have been given a chance to reunite with someone you thought lost,” Lexa says, and I can hear the sadness in her voice. “You have no need to apologise,” she says quietly.

For the first time I realise how difficult this must be for Lexa. She has given Ageth something she desperately wants for herself. A chance to see a lost and cherished sibling. Lexa has lost two now and will never see them again. Ageth has been granted a rare gift.

I take Lexa’s hand in mine and offer quiet comfort. No one else seems to have noticed her distress and she is doing a remarkable job at concealing it.

Ageth once again rises to her feet and announces, "I will go pack some belongings. Tomorrow when we leave, I will be going with you."

She begins to shuffle away, and Lexa turns in her chair and asks. "We are leaving?"

Ageth nods. "There is another way down the mountain," Ageth says. "But you aren't going to like it."

Chapter Fourteen

I set down my spoon and rise to the giant pot, so I can grasp the massive metal spoon and fill my bowl for the third time. I tip the delightful stew into my bowl, the chunks of meat and vegetable refilling it to the top. I lower the spoon back into the pot with a little clang. I stoop to collect a chunk of fresh bread from the loaf by the fire. My stomach feels warm and happy with dinner, and I look forward to being full for the first time in weeks, I intend to make the most of it.

As I return to my seat, I pass Melissa who stretches out her chair almost asleep, her bowl at her feet and a knife in her hands. I cannot help but notice her pale skin looks extra light since her shower, and it almost seems to reflect the firelight. Nathaniel is quick to replace me by the pots side as he refills his bowl. The big man is finally getting enough food to sustain all of that muscle. He ducks his head as he scoops the stew from the pot, the skin on his scalp shining in the firelight, showing off the freshly revealed skin around the low strip of hair down the centre. It would seem a few of us took a little extra shower time today.

Ageth and Tash are playing some game that uses a checkered stone board and little coloured bone pieces that they move across the board one at a time. I think they are trying to steal each other pieces, and I tried to follow the strategy when they started, but I quickly lost interest.

Maybe it is a game you have to play to find interesting, cause watching certainly wasn't. I scoop stew on to my spoon and start work on finishing my new bowl. The group is quiet, and I stare into the fire trying to focus on a thought that doesn't repeat Lexa's words 'Later,' back to me.

A small creature catches my attention, it is small, white and has bright yellow eyes that glint in the fading light of the cavern. I slowly lower my spoon from my mouth and reach for my dagger as the creature watches us crouched in a row of low red plants. Its bright white coat stands out vividly and it isn't as well camouflaged as it thinks it is.

The small fuzzy creature doesn't seem harmful, but anything could happen. Since this mission began I have been attacked by mushrooms and bats, so right now I have a high level of suspicion for the tiny creature watching us with unblinking eyes.

Suddenly the little white fur ball breaks cover and dashes for Ageth, its four legs revealing powerful muscles as it darts and weaves around the chairs with ease. It flashes past me, and I watch in fascination as a long tail swishes behind it adding balance to its graceful movements. The creature approaches Tash and Ageth at high speed and launches into the air with an impressive leap and lands in Ageth's lap. She jumps in surprise and smiles as she lowers her hands to the little furry creature and running her hands through the glossy pelt.

I let out a long breath and slowly re-sheath my dagger as Ageth continues to show zero signs of fear or apprehension in regards to the little creature.

"There you are Notlih, I was afraid you had wandered too far this time," she says affectionately rubbing it behind its pointed black ears.

The creature just sits quietly basking in her attentions, it rubs its head against her hand before striking an impressive pose that somehow makes its soft looking coat look extra glossy but also puffs out its chest a little. I cannot help but feel the way it holds itself is very regal and self-important.

I point at the creature. "What is that?"

Ageth looks down at the little fuzzy white thing in her lap and says, "Notlih is a cat. We live together and he has been a very important part of my life."

"A cat?" I repeat staring at the creature as it meets my eyes, its gaze unblinking.

Ageth nods. "Darkmor had a fondness for them, and it was one of the few species he brought down to Shadowsoul from the surface. I have always had a cat, even before his goblins came to the surface."

"You have always had this cat?" I ask astonished that something this little could live for so long.

"Oh goodness no!" Ageth smiles sadly. "These adorable little creatures do not live as long as us, however much I might wish." She strokes the cat fondly before continuing. "Notlih is one of many and I have loved them all."

Lucas pushes up his glasses and says, "Is it a pet?"

Ageth actually laughs a full chested laugh that ends in brutal shaking coughs. When she recovers, she finally says, "Spoken like someone who knows nothing about cats. A truer phrasing would be that Notlih owns me.

Or at least he thinks he does.” She strokes the little cat with such an extreme level of affection that it doesn’t seem to fit the statement.

Tash looks at it with uncertainty. “A cat attacked me once on an engineering job.” She pulls up her sleeve and inspects her forearm. “I think I still even have the scar.”

Ageth shakes her head. “Notlih wouldn’t hurt anyone, not even to save himself.”

The little cat casts one more glance at me with its huge yellow green eyes. It decides I’m unimportant and closes its eyelids as Ageth dutifully strokes it, leaving little clouds of white hairs that fall from the little cat’s coat with every stroke.

“Can I touch him?” I ask, surprising myself.

Ageth raises an aged eyebrow and says, “You will have to ask him.”

My eyes dart down to the little creature that has started to make a soft rumble in Ageth’s lap. “Notlih can talk?”

“Not the way we do, but cats have their own language,” she says taking my outstretched hand and moving it towards the cat’s face. “Let him sniff you and if he doesn’t move away, you can touch him.”

I awkwardly hang my hand in front of the little creature’s face, and he turns his wet nose towards it, the long whiskers on his face tickling my skin. After a long moment of apparent disinterest, Notlih pushes his head into my hand. Surprised, I run my fingers through unbelievably soft fur and try to copy the way Ageth had been stroking him. The little creature shakes its head suddenly and I retract my hand in haste. Notlih looks at me for a moment and the gaze almost seems offended that I had the audacity to stop stroking it.

“Notlih likes you,” Ageth says with a smile.

I smile. “He has a very nice coat.”

Notlih seems to understand my words and holds his head high, letting out the loud rumble I had heard before.

“Keep praising him like that and he might just start deciding he owns you too,” Ageth says wiping a clump of white fur from the bottom of her apron.

“Ageth,” Lexa asks as she lowers her bowl to the ground. “You have not told us anymore about a way down off the mountain since you returned.”

Ageth nods. "I have been avoiding thinking about it to be honest. It is a possibility, but an extremely high risk."

"Staying up here is not an option," Lexa replies calmly.

Ageth moves a piece on the board in front of her and when Tash doesn't move one in turn the older woman sighs and turns to Lexa. "To the north of here is a makeshift lift. It was installed over fifty years ago to bring the metal up here to build this house," Ageth says waving a hand behind her. "Some of the pieces were too large to bring up the mountain side."

"So, there is a lift to the bottom of the mountain?" Lexa clarifies.

Ageth nods. "A lift that hasn't been used in over fifty years, was installed in a rush by people who hardly knew what they were doing, and contains a single rickety basket that will maybe hold two individuals at a time."

Lexa sits back in her chair. "I understand your hesitation. There are many ways using this lift to reach the bottom of the mountain could be disastrous."

Ageth nods and when Tash shows no signs of resuming the game, she returns to petting Notlih.

"What if Claire and I can fix it like I fixed the pot?" Tash asks, turning in her chair so she is facing us.

I nod. "I would be happy to do that."

"There is another problem," Ageth adds. "The lift is controlled by a winder. It is at the bottom of the mountain."

"Is there anything at the top?" Lexa asks.

Ageth shakes her head. "Just a large pole and a pully."

Lexa turns to Lucas. "Do you think you could summon your tentacle at the bottom of the mountain while you are at the top?"

Lucas scratches his chin. "I have never tried, to make my magic work more than a few paces away, but I could give it a go."

"Another option is that one of us slides down the rope and winds it from the bottom," Nathaniel suggests.

"It is a long way down." Ageth says quietly. "A very long way down."

Lexa nods, her dark brown hair loose from her braids since the shower and my eyes linger on the way the hair curls around her face. "How far north?"

Ageth thinks on it. "It is quite close. If you left at first light, you would be there before the second sun rises."

"We cannot see the suns down here," Nathaniel grumbles.

Ageth looks at him fondly and says, "That doesn't mean I am wrong."

The wind suddenly picks up and stirs the soil around us flinging it in my face and whipping my hair wildly. The fire dancing in the coals reduces in size until only the tiniest flames survive on the embers. I try to stand but another strong burst of wind forces me to the ground, I struggle, but the strength of the wind cannot be fought. I twist my face squinting against the flying debris, an empty bowl rolls past my face and a stone piece of the game Ageth and Tash had been playing lays in the dirt nearby.

The roaring of the wind is so loud I cannot hear anything above it, only muffled shouts as Lexa tries to rise but a gust forces her flat to the ground not too far from me. My eyes land on Nathaniel as he valiantly pushes himself to his hands and knees. Even in the midst of all this I admire his strength, I cannot do more than squirm on the crushed shell.

Something clicks and I realise the wind is coming from directly above me and twisting in the gravel I turn my face as best I can to the sky where wide outstretched wings, shimmering oranges scales and a massive, muscled body blocks out everything else. Atorus lands with a thud I feel with my ears and my body, the wind stops immediately as Atorus tucks the magnificent wings away and sits proudly, glittering majestically in the fading afternoon light.

Ageth struggles to her feet outraged and Notlih reemerges from under her skirts. It takes one look at the dragon and begins aggressively licking its leg as if nothing is more important than getting that leg clean. The cat seems strangely at ease with the giant predator only a few metres away.

Ageth waves her arms. "Must you come every evening?" She waves her arms in a shooing motion.

Atorus sits staring at her with large unblinking purple eyes, completely unmoved. The double pupils grow larger as it focuses in on her waving arms. Atorus lets out a long slow breath, it almost seems as if Atorus is disappointed.

"You know A—the dragon," I ask, remembering almost too late that knowing Atorus's name is a gift not to be shared.

"Yes, it has come once a day for years," Ageth says. "Well, except the last week or so. I thought it had finally given up on tormenting me."

“What does the dragon come for?” Lexa asks climbing to her feet and restoring order to her hair.

Ageth aggressively tugs her apron straight and shrugs. “I don’t know, sometimes it tries to get into the house, but most times it just sits and stares until I have my medicine.”

“I am surprisingly heart warmed by the survival of you runtlings.” The fire in my head flairs, booming like an explosion inside my brain.

I clap my hands to my head and my necklace shines brightly. “Thank you,” I groan. “Could you talk quieter please. As you like to remind me, some of us are frail.”

Atorus huffs in what I suspect is a laugh. “Sorry small one,” the voice says much gentler this time.

Ageth looks between me and Atorus. “You can talk to it?” Ageth says astounded.

“Only when I am wearing the necklace or touching it,” I say to Ageth.

I turn to Atorus and ask in my mind. “What name should we use in front of Ageth for you?”

Atorus turns to me and the fire in my brain flares, “I believe your glass eyed friend called me Roary when he thought I wasn’t listening. You may use that.”

Ageth stares at me agape. “Only Phoenix touched can talk with dragons. Why did you not say you had met the god?”

“Because I haven’t met the god,” I insist. “At least not that I remember.”

Ageth gives me a measuring stare for a long moment. “How interesting. The god must have met you.”

“That is exactly what I said,” the flames that are Atorus flicker inside my head.

I turn to Atorus and say out loud, “It is just as confusing now as it was then. It would be great if someone could explain what it means.”

Atorus readjusts a wing. “You will figure it out.”

Ageth is watching me with deep interest, her eyes flicking between me and Atorus. I shuffle uncomfortably. This god thing just adds a new layer of pressure.

Lexa turns to Atorus and asks, “Could you please tell us why you keep visiting Ageth? She seems quite distressed by it.”

“I want her nest,” Fire flares in my brain. “I keep coming to see if she is dead yet. I am running out of time to lay my eggs, but I don’t want to take the nest by force. It would be bad karma.”

“Umm,” I say trying to filter the words into something more appropriate to say out loud. “Roary comes here to see if the place you live in has become vacant.”

“It is checking every day to see if I am dead?” Ageth asks hotly.

Maybe I didn’t filter it enough. I nod. “Roary wants to lay eggs here.”

The heat seems to leave Ageth almost immediately. “Eggs?”

I nod.

“A–Roary is a girl?” Lucas asks his eyes wide.

Atorus huffs. “I will never understand your human desire to stick a label on everything. I am Atorus, my gender is irrelevant to who I am. Not to mention fluid and it can be whatever I want it to be. Right now, I want to lay my eggs and I am running out of time.”

I turn to Lucas and say, “Roary just said that we shouldn’t try to label a gender. That gender has no impact on who Roary is as a–,” I pause. “Dragon.” I stop and rub my head. “This is hard. I don’t know what words to use.”

“Pronouns? Like he, him, she and her?” Lexa asks.

I nod. “Gender is not consistent for Roary and changes. Roary also doesn’t want to be referred to as a gender as it is irrelevant to who Roary is.”

Ageth nods is if this completely makes sense and asks, “Is Roary willing to make a trade?”

I look at Atorus who nods and the fire in my brain ignites again. “I would consider a trade depending on the terms.”

I turn to Ageth. “Roary wants to know your terms.”

Ageth thinks for a moment and says, “I will give you this home and this enclosed space if you take me, my cat and a few small items to my sister.”

Atorus looks at me and asks in my head, “Where is the wrinkled one’s sister?”

“Uhh,” I say out loud and turn to Lexa, “Roary wants to know where Eldri is.”

Lexa thinks for a moment. “I cannot give the location of another rebel base. But I could talk with Edward and see if we could have Eldri brought

to him and if he would be happy for a dragon visitor.”

Lucas smiles. “He is just crazy enough to love that idea.”

“Yes,” Lexa says slowly. “But I think it will take an effort to convince Carissa.”

“How far is this location?” Atorus asks, the fire that comes with the voice dancing in my brain.

“About a week from here when we walk,” I say uncertainly.

Atorus wraps a magnificent orange tail around clawed feet. “Your kind are slow and clumsy. I could do that trip in a day, slow one. If it can be arranged, I will agree to the terms the wrinkled one has set.”

Notlih moves to the great dragon sitting beside it in much the same position. Atorus lowers a massive head to sniff the tiny creature who flattens its ears back in irritation. Atorus turns to face me, and they both stare at me in with large unblinking eyes. I wonder if cats and dragons share an ancestor somewhere.

I clear my throat and say, “Roary says if Eldri can be brought to Edward that the terms of the trade are agreeable.”

Lexa nods. “If we can arrange this at least we no longer have to solve the problem of getting Ageth safely down the mountain.”

“I just told you there is a way down the mountain,” Ageth says with a sharp tone.

Nathanial crosses his arms. “Yes, and dangling an eighty-five-year-old from a rickety basket is not a plan any of us are comfortable with.”

Ageth places a hand on her heart. “Oh, big man, you do care.”

Nathanial’s skin darkens and he looks away from her, and suddenly becomes very interested in collecting all the bowls from the ground around us.

I turn to Atorus. “Is there any chance you would be willing to take us down the mountain?”

Atorus rises its full height and says, “I can carry the frail one. She is tiny and weighs nothing.” Atorus looks over our group before bright purple eyes land on me. “I could maybe carry the tiny one down the mountain,” Atorus says indicating to Tash. “If she took little with her. In my current condition I am limited. Going down the mountain would be more of a glide than a flight and I could take the small one.”

I turn to Tash. “Roary has offered to carry Tash down the mountain if she takes only what she absolutely must with her.”

“That would give us someone to wind the basket Ageth mentioned,” Lucas says.

Nathanial crosses his arms. “How will she defend herself from those beasts that hide underground?”

“He is protective of his mate. I wish mine was still here,” Atorus says the flames flickering sadly in my brain as the dragon turns to stare up at the giant hole in the ceiling for a long while before saying, “I will watch over the tiny one until the large one arrives.”

“Roary has agreed to stay at the base of the mountain with Tash and protect her until you arrive,” I say to Nathanial.

The big man turns to stare at the glittering dragon. They make eye contact for a long moment before Nathanial gives a single nod and says, “Thank you.”

Lexa rises to her feet. “I will contact Edward and see how quickly we can make arrangements.”

Atorus looks at her. “Make arrangements for tomorrow. My eggs will be here before the week is over, once they come, I will not be able to go anywhere for months.”

I take Lexa’s hand as she walks past. “Roary says make the arrangements for tomorrow. The eggs cannot wait and are due at the end of the week and once they are here Roary cannot leave them.”

Lexa squeezes my hand, “I will get it done. Eldri may not be there tomorrow, but we can certainly arrange for Ageth to arrive at Travellers Haven. I will do my best to convince Carissa to accept the arrival.”

I nod. “If not, perhaps a group can meet them nearby with Miss Q’s wagon to bring back Ageth. I don’t know how far she can walk.”

“I am right here,” Ageth says crossing her arms. “And I can walk just fine.”

I raise an eyebrow and look at her. “After riding a dragon for a full day?”

Ageth seems uncertain and I can see her commonsense warring with her desire to assert her independence. “It is possible I will be tired,” She admits. “However, if no alternatives can be arranged, I will walk.”

“It is settled,” Lexa says smiling at me. “I will go speak with Edward.”

With that, she walks towards one of the tents nearby, opens the front and steps into the shelter we had left our bags in after our shower. My

cheeks heat as I recall our shower, and something coils in my stomach as I think of Lexa's promise of later.

Atorus turns to me, and the flames reignite in my head. "Inform the wrinkled one that I will stay here tonight. Outside of the den, but from tomorrow at the second suns setting it will be mine."

"Roary has decided to stay here tonight," I say and Ageth casts the dragon a distrustful glance and I continue before heated words can be exchanged. "Roary will stay out of the house, but from tomorrow night, the house belongs to Roary."

Ageth waves at Atorus dismissively. "As long as the dragon takes me to my sister, it can burn this place to the ground for all I care."

I raise an eyebrow. "This is your home, surely you have some attachment to it."

Ageth shakes her head. "This is a well furbished prison. My prize for baring Darkmor a single child."

"You and Darkmor had a child?" Melissa says in a high voice.

Ageth twists her hands, her face full of anguish. "She did not survive her first day and after that, I could not ever bear to have another. Surprisingly Darkmor accepted this and didn't force the issue." She waves her hands at the walls around us. "Instead, he locked me in here and provided me with everything a girl could want. Except her family and her freedom."

I search for words, but none come. This is the stuff Lexa is good at. What am I supposed to say? Nothing will bring back her child or undo the past.

Atorus lets out a mighty sniff and a giant tear falls from a large purple eye to land with a splash that has Notlih scrambling for cover. Ageth walks right up to Atorus and places a dark wrinkled hand on the small scales on the dragon's face.

"Thank you," she says gently.

They look at each other for a long moment before Ageth turns to us. "The cauldron up the back has a liquid in it I have been forced to heat every month for the last few years."

"What is it?" Lucas asks squinting towards the giant black pot in the corner of the garden.

"The guards bring up a bunch of vials and I have been forced to heat the liquid until it is clear in exchange for the medicine that has extended

my life.” Ageth replies. “I am not sure what is in it, only that when someone drinks it, they become fanatically obsessed with Darkmor and his goals.”

“Those vials,” I say slowly and my eyes flick to Melissa who turns to look at the pot in the distance. She seems calm, maybe it needs to be closer to impact her.

“How do you heat it?” Lucas asks.

Ageth’s eyes flit to him and she wriggles her fingers. “With lightning. It needs intense heat every day for a month for the horrid stuff to be monstrously effective.”

“So, right now it is harmless?” I ask.

Ageth shakes her head. “Oh, in this state it will work, it is just weaker.”

“What happens if you add extra to it?” Lucas asks pushing his glasses up his nose.

Ageth looks at him like he might be crazy. “You want to add to it?”

Lucas rubs his hands together. “I know when I run my experiments, adding a wrong ingredient can completely ruin the batch, making it totally worthless.”

Ageth turns to the pot nodding. “It would have to be a lot of something.”

Atorus rises to huge clawed feet and marches towards the pot. “I will fix it stupid humans,” the fire flickers in my head.

“What is the dragon doing?” Ageth asks alarmed.

“Apparently, fixing it for us,” I reply.

Lucas shakes his head. “What can it do? Its fire will only make it worse. Extreme heat is how Ageth has been making it.”

Ageth looks at him sharply and says, “Forced to make it.”

Lucas shrinks into himself. “Sorry. It was a poor wording choice.”

Ageth nods. “Brilliant minds rarely think things all the through. It is often a great weakness, but it is one that can be overcome.”

Lucas seems struck by her words, and I cannot tell if he is pleased about being called brilliant, or offended about being told he doesn’t think things through.

Atorus reaches the pot, turns around, lifts its tail, and lets out a steaming pile of dung that basically fills the pot. Atorus glances back, scratches its back legs along the shells on the ground, tearing them up and

flicking great heaps of them at the dung. Finally satisfied Atorus struts back and sits by the fire licking a raised leg. Somehow the action emanates a great source of self-pride.

Lucas looks between Atorus and the giant cauldron. “Well, that was a lot of something.”

Ageth nods with her mouth open. “Yes, it was.”

“Will it fix it?” I ask.

Lucas nods. “That should drastically change the chemical composition of the liquid.”

Tash wrinkles her nose as the wind shifts. “Will it make it worse?”

Lucas shakes his head. “I very much doubt that it is anything now.”

Ageth lets out a belly full of laughter and smiles. “Except a steaming pile of shit in Darkmor’s brain washing liquid.”

I smile and Atorus makes a noise I am sure is laughter. Finally, Ageth’s laughter settles down and her breathing takes on a wheeze. “This old woman is going to bed. I haven’t had a full nights rest since I began that blasted medicine and it sounds like I am in for a big day tomorrow.” She waves at us and heads back to the hut calling out, “Sleep well.”

We watch her leave and the minute she rounds the hut Nathaniel says, “We are going to have to find a way to tie her to that damn dragon.”

Atorus snaps an orange head up and stares at Nathaniel. Atorus doesn’t need to speak to get the point across. Nathaniel needs to be more respectful.

Nathaniel swallows and says to Atorus, “If that is okay with you.”

Atorus nods and the fire in my head returns. “I agree to rope being tied to some of my horns. Solely for the purpose of keeping the wrinkled one attached. I am not a mount.”

“Roary says it is okay, but the rope is only to help Ageth stay on,” I relay.

Nathaniel nods. “I will go get something ready.” With that he stomps off into one of the nearby tents.

Tash stares after him for a long moment before Melissa waves a hand. “Just go to him.” Tash rises to her feet and Melissa adds, “Try to remember, tents have thin walls.”

Tash’s ears turn pink, and she speeds off after Nathaniel.

Lucas shakes his head. “With the way those two are at it, we should invest in headwear that reduces sound.”

“Like headphones?” Melissa asks spinning a dagger in her fingers.

Lucas slaps his hand on his thigh. “That’s the word! Yes, headphones.”

Melissa rises to her feet. “Well, I’m going to my tent and hopefully fall asleep before those two get at it properly.” She jerks her thumb back towards the tent Tash and Nathaniel occupy.

She turns to me with a smile. “Lots of empty tents to choose from.” She begins walking away and calls over her shoulder, “with only two taken and all these tents left, I could pick any I like because there is the option of sleeping in my own tent.”

Melissa makes a great show of checking a few empty tents before finally choosing one and stepping inside.

Lucas comes to stand beside me. “It is weird how she felt the need to point that out.” He gestures to the tents around us. “This place could take twenty to thirty guards. Of course, there are a lot of tents, we could all have one with plenty left over.”

I can feel my face heating up as I look for a way to change the track of this conversation. “Melissa does like to state the obvious.”

Lucas nods and lets out a bit yawn. “I’m off to bed too. See you in the morning.” With that, Lucas heads off towards the rows of tents and chooses an unoccupied one.

I rub my face in my hands. Melissa knows. There is no way she would make a comment like that unless it was to poke at the fact that Lexa and I are still sharing.

“Your mate is done talking.” Atorus says curling up around the fire, Notlih carefully picks his way around the dragon and heads off towards Ageth. Atorus lays a giant head by the flames. “The annoying hiss of the crystals singing has faded.”

“Sometimes I am grateful others cannot hear you,” I say rubbing my forehead.

Atorus huffs and the fire in my head leaves.

I check the fireplace and roll a few stones back into place that had dislodged during Atorus’s landing and I add a few extras, banking it for morning. Rising to my feet I walk around Atorus’s massive head, I pause for a moment. Do we need a watch?

I look out at the high walls, and it would seem they would keep out a lot of predators, but the gate is open. I glance at Atorus. Well, with a giant

dragon in the yard it is unlikely something else will try to get us in our sleep. The glittering orange dragon huffs and rolls to the side revealing the almost healed wound on its belly. The wound looks much better, but it is still a nasty red colour. It is no longer an open gash which is a huge improvement. Dragons must heal quickly, it has only been two days.

Stepping around the chairs I move towards our tent on the far-left side of the rows. Thankfully it is far away from Melissa's. I lift the flap and step inside to find Lexa placing the carefully wrapped crystals in her bag. She looks up at me and smiles.

"How was Edward?" I ask sitting down on the bed Lexa has already made up with our blankets.

"Enthralled with the idea. He was so taken with it, I did not have to convince Clarissa, who settled once I reassured her that Roary is perfectly friendly if you are appropriately respectful."

I smile and play with the edge of the blanket. "Friendly is one way to phrase it. The way Roary talks in my head is not often respectful or appropriate."

"How so?" Lexa enquires settling beside me.

"Roary has some interesting ways of addressing us and is often very blunt."

Lexa nods. "It would seem being a top predator has its perks."

"I am certainly not about to correct Roary's word choices. I just don't relay them to others."

Lexa takes my hand. "You have done well. It cannot be easy communicating with a dragon as you do. I recall the hold it had on me, and it was like my mind was aflame. It was painful."

I nod. "Sometimes speaking with Roary is like having a whirlwind of fire blast through my brain. It is sort of like having a headache that burns and is occasionally wildly inappropriate." I fidget for a moment before saying, "Roary keeps insisting we are mates."

"I suppose in Roary's world view we are."

I nod and my stomach flutters wildly. This is all so new, but part of me wouldn't hate the idea of being mated with Lexa or perhaps raising children with her. I push the thoughts away. It is far too soon to be thinking of these things.

"You are tense," Lexa says rubbing her thumb across my palm. "I know I said later, but we don't need to do anything you don't want to."

I frown. I was just having thoughts about speeding this relationship up. The last thing I want is to slow it down. Turning, I look into her emerald, green eyes, filled with so much care and sincere understanding. She is so bloody perfect. I launch myself at her, pushing her back into the blankets and she lets out a gasp of surprise as I take her lips in mine.

Her hands wrap around my waist, and she meets my kisses with enthusiasm, and it stokes the fire that has been burning in my belly for months now. If it gets any more intense, I am honestly not sure what will happen, but I very much want to find out.

Lexa's hands move to my hair and grip it tightly, pulling me in for a deeper kiss. After long moments I break away and tug at her armour, together we fight with the fastenings and remove the garment, dumping it carelessly on the side of the bed before adding her singlet to the pile. I sit back with my thighs across her hips and take in the sight of her breathing heavily beneath me. I swallow at the expanse of uncovered flesh all the way to her hips. Lexa hasn't put her chest bindings back on since the shower.

It is a good thing I didn't know, or I wouldn't have been able to concentrate on any conversations this evening. I run my fingers along the olive skin playing with the lines on her firm stomach. White scars litter the surface here and there adding variety to the textures of her soft skin. Curious I drag my fingers to her breasts and run the tips along the skin there, delighting in the sharp intake of breath as I brush the light brown peaks. Lexa grips my thighs and her hips rock under mine, as I return my fingers for a second trip delighting in her reaction.

"Claire," she breathes, a light blush on her cheeks.

Eager to bring more sounds like that from her lips I lean in and kiss her deeply, the fire from the kiss pulling soft noises from the back of my throat. I return my fingers to her chest and dance them along the peaks, scratching lightly and in a blur of movement I am suddenly on my back and Lexa is above me with her beautiful brown hair framing her face. Her emerald eyes pin me with a burning intensity that sends a wave of adrenaline to my stomach.

She tears my clothes from me, kissing every inch of skin she reveals until every item of clothing is gone and I am bare before her. My hands fly to her head as she lavishes attention on my chest, sensations roll from her mouth across my body in waves of burning pleasure. It's all consuming

and somehow not enough at the same time. A sharp nip pulls a moan from me, and I try to pull Lexa closer, one hand in her hair and the other digging nails into the warm flesh of her shoulder. She moves down my body kissing along my stomach and hips and as I catch my breath, I mourn the loss of the attention to my chest only to have a whole new kind of pleasure take over as she settles between my thighs.

Her kisses send coursing waves of pleasure through every inch of me before rolling back and building in my stomach, soft noises escape unbidden as Lexa's hands grip my waist trying to keep my rocking hips still as she brings me to a precipice. The feelings are so enormous I cannot focus on anything except everywhere Lexa touches me, her mouth and hands leaving a blazing trail of pleasure.

I know I am being louder than I should, but I cannot bring myself to care. My hands grip Lexa's head and she removes a hand from my waist and brings it between my thighs. An explosion of pleasure moves through my body as she enters me, never ceasing her kisses and I fall over the edge with her name tumbling repeatedly from my lips.

Strong arms wrap around me and for long moments I just let the waves of pleasure roll over me as Lexa places gentle kisses on my neck. Slowly I come back to myself and burning desire springs back as I feel her pressed against my back. Never had I imagined it would be like this, I had no idea I could feel this way.

Now that I know it's possible, I am determined to help Lexa feel that way too. I roll in Lexa's arms and kiss her, the taste of myself on her lips turning the burning desire into a raging inferno. Unwilling to end the kiss, I struggle with the buttons on her pants, and I am forced to break away as we fight to remove them from her long legs. My eyes dart to Lexa's breathless smile and one pulls across my lips to mimic hers. She hasn't put her underwear back on either.

Desire rages through me and I grasp her hips pulling her towards me, the blankets drag along with her, and she lets out a groan that sends a wave of pleasure through me. I drop my mouth to hers for a searing kiss and our bodies meet without barriers, her strong legs wrapping around my waist and pulling a moan from me. I nip and suck my way along her neck, trying and failing to care about the marks I leave in my wake.

Her legs tighten around my hips at one of my harder bites and she offers more of her neck for my attentions. Lowering my hand, I play along

her hips, dragging my fingertips along the skin there. Her legs loosen around my waist, and I slip a hand between us.

Her hands grip my back tightly leaving trails of delicious burning with her nails as my name spills from her lips. I drop my head to her shoulder as the sensation around my fingers sends burning desire back to my stomach as Lexa moans beneath me. My hips rock in time with hers and I bite, kiss, and nibble the skin on her chest, revisiting the peaks causes Lexa's hands to fly to my head and press me closer.

"Please, Claire," Lexa breathes. "Don't stop."

I smile as my brain picks up the word 'don't' as opposed to 'do not.' I feel a particular wave of pride at this accomplishment and speed up the movement of my hand as Lexa gasps and groans below me. Her muscles everywhere go rigid and I lean in and bite her neck, soothing the sting with my tongue. Lexa comes undone beneath me as she grasps tightly at my back, and I can feel the waves of tension roll through her body.

We lay together for a long time, as I listen to her heart with my head on her chest while her breathing returns to normal. The heat in my belly has quietened but it is far from gone and I suspect it never will be with Lexa around.

"Claire," Lexa says holding me tightly and I wriggle up, so we are facing each other her green eyes search mine. "That was, intense."

"Why did we wait so long to do that?" I ask with a grin.

Lexa smiles back and tucks hair behind my ear. "We were constantly interrupted by saving the world."

"Oh yeah, that," I say and run my fingers along Lexa's waist, a wave of goosebumps rolls across her skin at the contact. I smile and add in a low voice, "We are not being interrupted right now."

Lexa raises an eyebrow and a smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. "We are not."

I lean in and give her a searing kiss that leaves us both breathless. I grip her hips and pull our bodies together delighting in the way Lexa's breath hitches at the firm handling.

I smile and say, "I think we should make up for lost time."

Lexa leans in, her lips a breath from mine when she whispers, "I concur."

Chapter Fifteen

Footsteps crunching on the crushed shell near the tent cause my eyes to fly open, the boots pause for a moment before they march away. I relax as I recall where we are and the sounds of Tash and Melissa talking in the near distance settles my nerves. It is probably just Nathaniel or Lucas walking past us on their way to the little camp fire. I stretch my feet as my eyes adjust to the light coming through the canvas, it is much brighter than it was when I was last awake.

I smile at the memory. The not-so-subtle sounds of Melissa arguing with Lucas about the best way to cook something over the fire floats to my ears along with the enticing smell of breakfast that begins to fill the tent. My stomach rumbles and I stretch, a pleasant ache in my muscles reminding me of last night's activities.

Lexa's arm is draped across my bare stomach, and she rests with her head on my chest, her breathing even as she peacefully sleeps even with all the noise Melissa and Lucas are making. I smile and gently brush some hair from her face and run my fingers along her strong jaw. It has been a while since I have seen her so relaxed. Normally Lexa wakes to every strange sound in the night, even with two other people on watch. I place a soft kiss on her forehead, and she snuggles in closer, pulling tightly at my side as if simple strength could pull us closer than we currently are. I lay like this for a long time and almost fall back asleep when boots stomp past the tent again.

"Nathaniel, leave them alone," Tash says in a faraway voice.

Melissa snorts. "Yeah, after last night those two need all the rest they can get."

Nathaniel grumbles about needing to leave soon and moves away, the crunching footsteps following him as he moves towards the others and away from our tent.

My cheeks heat up and Lexa sighs into my chest. "It appears we have been made."

I chuckle as I peer down at emerald green eyes and a brilliant smile. "We weren't exactly discreet," I say.

Lexa tilts her head up and we share a gentle kiss. She pulls away and says with a smile, "Good morning, Claire."

I grin back and reply, "Morning."

She runs a hand across the scar on my stomach and asks, "Are you well?" I nod enthusiastically and she laughs softly. "We should get up, before someone feels the need to attempt assistance."

"I am actually amazed at Melissa's restraint. I am pretty sure she knew last night before bed," I say.

Lexa nods. "They are all intelligent. We are very affectionate. They were bound to uncover the truth at some point."

"I am not looking forward to the enthusiasm Melissa already demonstrates at interrupting Tash and Nathaniel being directed at us. She is also quite gifted at her poking remarks."

"They have borne the brunt for some time now, it is only fair we share the burden," Lexa says as she sits up and the blanket falls to her waist, causing the fire in my belly to reignite with such intensity that it is almost like we had done nothing to quell it. She digs through her bag, and I watch in disappointment as she puts on her chest bindings and with a grumble, I pull myself up and start dragging my clothes on too.

Lexa tugs her pants on and rises to her feet. I thought last night would help to relieve some of the charged energy between us, but all I can think about is getting her clothes off again and picking up where we left off. It is probably good we have all the distractions of the mission. If I could have my way, we wouldn't be leaving this bed for some time. I rise beside her and before she can step out of the tent, I grab her hand and pull her into a tight hug. She holds me back as I breathe in the scent of her, we share a quick kiss and step out of the tent.

Melissa looks up with a huge grin and holds up two plates of some cooked meat and vegetables. "I bet you two are hungry after all the work you did last night."

My cheeks heat up and Lexa takes my hand, leading me to a chair by the fire. I sit down as Lexa takes the plates from Melissa and says, "We are hungry. Thank you."

That seems to stump Melissa momentarily before she sits across from us. Perhaps being forward with Melissa is the way to go. Maybe it is only fun if we get all awkward about her comments.

Melissa perks up and says, “That was quite the marathon, you two were having.”

Lucas nods, finishing the last of his meal and adds, “It just kept going. It never takes that long with Tash and Nathanial.”

This time Nathanial chokes on the chunk of meat he had been eating and Tash smacks the big man on the back. Once his breathing has re-established his ears are darker than normal and I am not sure if it is from the comment Lucas made, or the choking. Melissa seems quite pleased with herself and resumes her meal with enthusiasm. I am sure she creates lists of embarrassing questions and comments in her head when she has spare time just so they are ready for a moment like this.

Ageth shuffles out with a backpack over one shoulder and comes to sit around our little campfire. She places the large backpack beside the seat and out of one of the flaps pops Notlih’s white head. The cat seems quite content to watch us from its place inside the bag and only ventures out far enough to take the food Ageth offers before returning to the bag with his prize.

It doesn’t take long for us to finish our food and as we are climbing to our feet Ageth says, “Please raid my pantry and take as much as you can carry. You may also have anything still in the house you think would be helpful, I have what I need.”

Atorus turns and snuffs at her. She puts her hands on her hips and says, “By your own terms, this house is mine until the sun sets.”

“That is generous of you Ageth, thank you,” Lexa says, setting aside her empty plate and heading towards the kitchen with our shared backpack.

Ageth’s gaze follows her. “There are more bags in the cupboard near the pantry. The guards were forever leaving them all over the place and I kept the best of them there.”

Lexa nods and disappears around the side of the house followed by Lucas and Tash. Melissa comes and plops beside me in the chair Lexa had just vacated and says, “So, you and Lexa. I was starting to wonder if I would need to draw you two a map to help you figure it out.”

I grin. “We figured it out.”

Melissa laughs and says, “Yes, all night long apparently.”

I wriggle my eyebrows at her. “And if I had my way, it would have been all morning too.”

Melissa sits back astounded, but a small smile creeps onto her face. “A challenge,” she says with a growing grin. “I will have to try harder.”

I turn to Ageth. “Do you think there is anything else we should know about the lift before we get there?”

Ageth thinks on my question. “Not that I can think of. It has been many years since I visited it. Only recently did I return with the guards to see if it could be used to transport the nasty vials of liquid they have me make up here. I think the goal was to speed up production.”

Atorus looks up alarmed and I slip my hand into my pocket grasping my necklace as the fire in my head awakens. “I will destroy the lift once you runts are all finished with it. I must protect my brood and the guards cannot have another way up here while my eggs are young.”

I nod and reply in my head as I slip the necklace around my neck. “That is wise.”

Nathanial approaches Atorus and holds up a bunch of knotted and looped rope. He clears his throat. “Roary, this is to help Ageth stay on during her trip.”

I raise an eyebrow. For Nathanial that is downright polite and respectful. Atorus leans forward and sniffs the device.

Atorus looks at me. “How will it come off?”

I relay the message to Nathaniel who replies, “There will be a length of rope around your chest that can be cut loose with one of your claws. The whole thing will come undone, and I will show you which one to cut.”

Atorus lowers a magnificent orange head and allows Nathanial to strap the contraption around the vibrant torso.

Lexa and the others return carrying bulging knapsacks in their hands. I can see there is one for each of us now. That will make carrying supplies easier and hopefully reduce the stress of travel a little. Ageth rises to her feet, closes her huge bag with Notlih in it and swings it over her shoulder as she begins to shuffle down the path towards the gate. The bag wriggles for a moment before it settles, a large bulge in one side. I swear I can hear the cat making that rumbling again, even from here and through the bag.

She waves at us. “Come on, now that we are packed and breakfasted you have a world to save, and I have a long-lost sister to meet.”

We collect our things and follow behind her at an almost agonizingly slow pace. We reach the gate, and I cannot help but think I could have

stayed by the fire and had a cup of tea and left after that. I probably still would have been at the gate before Ageth.

Ageth stands at the open gate, her hand on the twisting metal flowers for a long moment before she takes a big breath and steps outside her prison and past the walls without a guard for the first time in her life. She smiles broadly and turns back to the walled prison raising a wrinkled middle finger. With that she turns and hobbles down the path lined by brambles at a slightly faster pace than before. Every step screams a deep heartfelt glee.

We make it to the end of the crushed shell path when Atorus huffs in my head. "I cannot stand this, the frail one must climb onto my back now. At this rate my eggs will be here before we reach this lift she speaks of."

"Um, Ageth," I say she pauses in her hobbling to face me with a grin. "Roary insists you climb into the harness now. There is a long journey to be made and you must conserve your strength for the long flight."

Ageth eyes me and the dragon with keen blue eyes. "The dragon said I'm slow, didn't it?" I fidget with the straps on my backpack and avoid eye contact with Ageth. She chuckles, "You try so hard, and it is sweet. But I am old, and I have met dragons before. They are never that polite or considerate."

"Alright then, let's get this happening." She waves to Atorus who crouches down. Ageth pulls at the ropes and turns to Nathaniel. "Well big guy, are you going to lift this damsel in distress into the saddle or not?"

Nathaniel starts and hurries to comply. Ageth seems immensely pleased as he takes hold of her waist and lifts her onto Atorus's back with ease. The ropes are tied around her, and we set off at a much faster pace towards the north side of the mountain.

Lexa comes to walk beside me, and she brushes our fingertips together. Our magic activates in dancing blue green light for the brief contact before fading. Lexa smiles and asks, "Do you think you and Tash can repair the lift?"

I nod. "I don't see why we can't. The only problem I can think of is that Tash might need to touch the broken bits to fix them."

Lexa thinks on it for a moment. "You do not need to touch the injured parts of someone to heal them. Perhaps it will work the same way for Tash."

“I really hope so. I don’t want to have to find another way down the mountain.” My brain flashes to the last time I went down a mountain side and I grip my jaw tightly as I force the image of falling rocks and pain away. I take a long slow breath and try to centre myself.

Lexa takes my hand, and the magic reignites around us. She places a hand under my chin, and I stop as dancing blue green light encases us and asks, “Claire are you okay?”

I nod and fight the prickles of tears behind my eyes. “Sometimes I get flashes of being trapped in the landslide,” I admit, and I swallow back the pain that tries to emerge as I voice my greatest fear. “It can be difficult. The fear comes back with the flash, and it can be hard to push away.”

Lexa bushes her thumb along a tear that escapes to run down my cheek. “Thank you for sharing. What you had to endure will take time to heal.”

I turn to look at the group moving along without us. I feel a prickle on the back of my neck as a magical wound emerges there. “We should keep moving. The sooner we are down the side of that mountain, the better I will feel.”

I take Lexa’s hand and give it a squeeze before I slide my fingers from hers. I already miss the contact and I wish bitterly there was a way for us to touch one another without using our magic accidentally.

As the blue green light disappears around us, I hear Melissa call out, “Is that the lift?”

I turn to find a large pole attached to the massive rock beneath it with some kind of rusted metal brackets. The pole itself is thick wood that looks like it is rotting at the base. A long thick rope links through a pulley at the top and disappears down the side of the mountain. Lexa moves to the edge to peer over and I watch a few paces away, anxiety bubbling in my stomach as I constantly assess the rock she stands on for any flaws that might indicate it could break away from the side of the mountain. Tash comes to stand beside her and the two look over the contraption squinting at the far side down at the bottom of Mount Wolner.

Lexa comes back to the group. “It is a long way down, but if this lift system can be repaired, we should have no trouble using it to get down the mountain side.”

Tash wriggles her fingers. “I think I can fix it. I cannot see what is on the other side, so I can only assume it is as damaged as this pole is. But it

is still upright in the distance and the basket hangs halfway.”

I nod and inch towards the pole, taking Tash’s cold hand and watching in awe as the yellow and blue magic weaves beams of light around us. Tash places a hand on the pole and almost immediately a magical wound opens up on my skin. I close my eyes and focus on the thought that I am only helping Tash fix the lift.

Another wound opens up on my neck and the burning sting tells me it is only slightly smaller than the last. I peer over at Tash who is frowning, her eyes as yellow as the gem around her neck. A magical wound opens up from the corner of her mouth to her chin, but I can see the repairs on this end are almost done. The pole, rope and metal all look new. A wound burns its way through my eyebrow and Tash lets go of my hand with a gasp, falling to her knees on the hard rock. I kneel beside her, feeling slightly dizzy myself.

“Tash?” I ask.

She nods. “It hurts and I’m freezing, but I’m okay.”

Nathanial wraps a blanket around her and holds her to his chest trying to warm her with his body. Lucas moves to the side of the mountain and his violet necklace glows brightly as he frowns before closing his eyes. Another purple flash is met with another frown.

He turns to us. “I can keep trying, but I cannot get my tentacle even to the base of the mountain. Let alone to the other side of the lift.”

Atorus looks up at the growing light coming through the holes in the cavern roof. “The tiny one can rest for a few moments, but then we must leave,” the dancing flames in my head say.

I nod but before I can relay the message Tash rises shakily to her feet. Lucas summons another tentacle at his feet and passes it to Tash as Nathanial lifts Ageth out of the harness.

Tash looks at him questioningly and Lucas says, “Maybe you can take it to the other side. If the magic can go that far, it should turn the lift for you so you can have a rest.”

She smiles gratefully at him, the bright yellow lines on her face standing out vividly. “I really hope it goes that far.”

Nathanial lifts Tash into the harness and shows Melissa how to attach her safely. Apparently, it will be up to Melissa to get Ageth back in the saddle once he goes down the mountain. Atorus huffs loudly and shakes its

huge body, glittering orange scales shimmer with the moment and Tash holds fast.

Without warning Atorus launches down the mountain side, the large, magnificent wings falter for only a moment before they gracefully glide down the mountain. They land at the base of the lift and Tash scrambles to get out of the harness. She moves over to the pole, places the purple tentacle on the ground and rubs her face. I can see even from here by her actions that whatever she is looking at isn't good.

"That doesn't look promising," Lucas murmurs.

Lexa nods. "Tash may be able to fix it."

Atorus looks up at me as Tash pulls tools out of her belt and sets to work on something at the base of the pole. Fire flickers in my brain but I cannot hear what Atorus is saying. I close my eyes and focus, but it doesn't improve the flickering.

"Roary is trying to tell me something," I say.

"What is it?" Lexa asks glancing between me and the scene at the base of the mountain.

"I don't know. Roary is too far away, and I cannot hear," I reply.

Lucas pushes his glasses up his nose. "How does the talking between the two of you work?"

I shrug. "I can only hear Roary when I have my necklace on or I am touching—" I break off and start to dig through my bag.

"Claire?" Lexa says kneeling beside me.

I shove my arm right into the bottom and rummage around there. "The scale Roary gave me," I say.

Lexa's eyes widen and she begins to dig through her bag. She retrieves a deep orange scale with flecks of yellow and red and she hands it to me.

"It is about time puny human!" the fire in my head roars.

I clamp my hands around my head and groan. Lexa takes off her necklace, shoves it in her pocket and places a soothing hand on my back.

I compose myself and grumble back in my head. "What is happening down there?"

"The lift did not repair on this side. The small one is working to get the spinny bit fixed, but the pole is as fragile as one of your minuscule bones. It will break very easily."

"What is happening Claire?" Lexa asks gently.

“The pole down the bottom didn’t repair with the magic,” I say. “Tash might be able to get it going, but the pole is fragile.”

I turn to look down the mountain at Tash saying something to Atorus who flattens its ears back before turning to look at me. “The miniature human said you will need to come down first so the two of you can repair it,” The fire breaths in my head. “She is a little spit fire. There is a lot of spark in that tiny body.”

I shake my head. I cannot be sure if that last bit was annoyance or affection.

Suddenly the pulley above us begins to wind and Nathaniel moves towards the edge, eager to get to Tash.

I rub my head and say, “I need to go down the mountain first.” Nathaniel looks at me in confusion and I add. “The pole might break. If I can get down the side of the mountain Tash and I will be able to fix it. That way it will be safer for everyone.”

“There must be another way,” Lexa says with a slight edge to her usually calm voice. “If the pole is that fragile, surely no one should be attempting to use that lift. Could Roary take you?”

I focus on the scale in my hands. “Atorus, could you take me down the mountain?”

The fire glitters softly in my head. “Sorry little runt. You are bigger than the tiny one and I almost couldn’t carry her down the mountain.”

I look at Lexa and shake my head. Lexa gets up and aggressively paces back and forth. “Perhaps we could reinforce the pole?”

“With what?” Nathaniel grunts.

“We could cut the rope and try to repel down the mountain side,” Lucas suggests.

Lexa pauses and considers it but Melissa cuts in. “Not a chance. Those bats have lived in every dark crevice along the side of this mountain, and I can guarantee they are below us right now.”

I take Lexa’s hand as the basket arrives. “This is the only way.”

“You cannot Claire. What if the lift fails?”

I squeeze her hand. “I didn’t die last time I fell down a mountain. The necklace kept me alive then, perhaps it will again now?”

Lexa looks absolutely mortified at the suggestion and I can see her brain desperately searching for an alternative. I lean in and give her a kiss, before I break away and climb into the basket. Even Melissa doesn’t utter

a word at the display of affection, and I swear I see her swatting away a tear.

The basket creaks alarmingly but it holds, and I grasp the orange scale and say, "I am ready."

Chapter Sixteen

The wide rectangular basket lurches and swings alarmingly as it drops off the side of the mountain, I sit in the basket and grip the low sides as it settles into a rhythm of slow rocking. I shift and the thing tilts disturbingly. If this thing rocks too much I will struggle to stay in, the low sides only come up to my chest and that's while I am sitting.

A creak makes my eyes snap up to the baskets pulley and mercifully it has been repaired like the pole on this side. My eyes assess the ropes attaching the woven carrier to the lift and all the knots seem true and the rope looks new. I turn and lock eyes with Lexa who is standing far too close to the edge of the cliff, watching the basket with such intensity it is almost like she can hold the lift together with willpower alone. We stay like that until the distance makes it impossible.

The wind picks up now that I am clear of the mountain side, and it rocks my basket from side to side. The breeze cools my sweat bathed skin and would be nice if I wasn't dangling over a terrible fall. One that I am certain I would have plenty of time to scream about on the way down. I grip the woven edges tightly and try not to think about what will happen if the pole at the other end of the line breaks.

It is quiet here, only the wind and the creaking of my basket as it slides along on the rope accompanies the roaring of my heartbeat in my ears. I am about a third of the way down when the basket suddenly lurches, the view of jagged dark peaks seems alarmingly close as the whole contraption drops in the air before it suddenly stops, and I am thrown about in the basket. My stomach flies into my throat with the movement and nausea almost overcomes me.

I close my eyes and try very hard not to think of the last time I fell down a mountain side. I tuck my necklace under my armour and really hope it keeps me alive if this lift falls from the sky.

The basket lurches again, this time accompanied by a sickening crack. I hear Lexa call my name as I drop, only my iron grip on the basket keeps the two of us together. The lift jerks to a stop that almost tosses me out of the basket. The rope above me snap tight and I stop falling but the basket swings wildly on the pulley, the low sides offering little purchase

and I am forced to lay in the bottom and grasp the edges as best as I can. The basket tips to the side as the whole thing drops again and I cling to the woven frame for dear life as it rocks wildly. I am treated to a nauseating view of the jagged rocks below as the basket swings about. My head bashes the side of the basket, and a burst of silver stars fill my vision.

My fingers hurt from the effort of holding on and I jam my toes into the side lip, anything to get a better grip on this damned thing. Slowly I return to a gentle side swing, and I lay shaking in the bottom of the basket. The wind blows through my hair and along the sweat covered skin causing a wave of shivers as I struggle to regain even breathing, panic threatening to overwhelm me.

The pulley squeals and the basket lurches forward again resuming its trip down the mountain, the movement is jerky and slower, but I am still moving along the line and not falling to my death. I peak over the side to find Lucas's tentacle and Atorus fighting to keep the pole upright almost twenty paces from where it was last time I looked. Long drag marks in the sand show the pole's trip and Atorus's effort to stop it, if the drag marks leading up to the struggling dragon are anything to go by. Tash frantically winds the lever that is slowing dragging me and my basket down the mountain side.

"Are you okay little one?" Atorus asks inside my head. The fire that comes with the voice is strained.

I jump and realise in the chaos the scale had ended pressed up against my chest between me and the basket, a long bloodied triangular cut sits around it where it has dug in. I nod and then remember Atorus cannot see me.

I swallow and let out a shaky, "I am alive."

The fire returns dancing gently in my head. "I can feel your terror. Hold on, it is just a little further puny one."

I nod and bury my face in the basket, gripping painfully at the sides. Finally, the basket comes to a stop jamming in the sand at the base of the mountain. I roll out of it and lay shaking on the ground, strangely grateful for the sand sticking to my face and hair.

Tash crouches beside me and asks, "Claire, are you okay?"

I nod and realise I have smears of blood all over me from the cut caused by Atorus's scale. "I am okay," I manage. I wipe something

tickling my face and I realise I am bleeding there too. Probably from hitting my head on the basket.

I climb unsteadily to my feet and turn to look back up at the mountain. I can see Lexa standing on the edge, her hair flicking in the wind. I raise my arm and she raises hers back. Melissa tugs on her arm and Lexa steps away from the edge.

My eyes land on the broken pole and move over to help Tash and Atorus drag it back towards the place where it was mounted before it broke. The pole is pretty rotted and light, but the heavy rope and basket make the work gruelling. Finally, we get the pole back in place and Tash runs to get Lucas's tentacle which had just been waving in the sand where we had left it.

She brings it over to the pole and says to the tentacle, "Hold this pole."

The waving tentacle does as it's told, and I raise an eyebrow. Who knew they were so obedient?

"Ready?" Tash asks.

I nod and take Tash's hand. Our magic weaves around us once more, yellow and blue flickering in dancing waves as Tash focuses her magic into the pole. The deep ruts in the pole smooth out and the base of the pole reconnects to the other half buried in the sand. Burning pain sears across my shoulders and I tumble to my knees but keep hold of Tash's hand. The trip down the mountain has really done a number on me. Tash turns her yellow eyes towards me and the colour flickers.

"I am fine," I say. "Keep going, we need to get the others down here."

She nods and returns to her work. Another wound opens up on my thigh and the pain shoots up my spine.

Atorus's voice floats into my head. "Focus little one. Your attempts at healing me will only cause you great pain."

I nod and repeat in my head, I am only helping Tash mend the pole. I try, but exhaustion makes it hard to focus. Finally, Tash lets go of my hand and it falls into the sand.

"It's fixed," she says proudly.

"Well done," I say as I lay down in the sand panting. "Now get the rest of them down here."

Tash nods and drags the tentacle over to the lever. She points at the bit that spins and says, "Wind this."

The little tentacle complies, and the basket makes its trip back up the mountain side, it waves freely in the wind without anything to weigh it down. I am going to have nightmares about that bloody basket. I lay in the sand staring up at the enormous mountain, from here I can see the others at the flat peak, and they look so small. Atorus comes over and a large nose huffs in my face as I am gently nudged out of the way. It takes me a long moment to realise I was laying where the basket will stop when it returns with its next passenger.

“Thank you, fragile human,” Atorus says lifting a front leg and revealing the wound on its stomach from the spear fully healed. A long yellow line runs through the glittering scales, and it no longer looks red and angry.

I nod, sand cushioning my pounding head. “Don’t mention it.”

Tash hands me a water canteen and I grasp it, taking grateful gulps. She watches me closely and asks, “Did you heal yourself?”

I raise my hand to my head and touch it, the open wound is gone but the thumping headache is still there. I look down at my chest to find a thin triangular line of new pink skin. “I think so,” I reply.

“That is good. The headwound looked nasty,” Tash replies. “Sorry we dropped you. I thought the pole would hold. I didn’t realise it had that crack in the base just under the sand.”

“There wasn’t another way,” I say, closing my eyes and enjoying the relief the darkness provides my pounding head. “There was no way for you to get back up the mountain and there was no way for anyone else to get down.”

“You were heavier than I thought you would be,” Tash says looking over the complete and now fully restored pole.

I smile. “That’s my bad. I should have had less for breakfast.”

Tash lets out a small laugh and the tentacle stops winding. I turn to the top of the mountain and watch as Nathaniel lumbers in. Lexa raises her hand in the distance and Tash turns to the tentacle.

“Wind it the other way now please.”

The little purple limb obediently begins to wind the other way.

Something wails loudly in the distance, and we all twist towards the noise. The screeching goes on for a long time, but only mounds of sand and large chunks of the fallen cavern roof meet my eyes for as far as I can

see. I don't see the beast that makes the sound, but the vermillion live underground and it could be anywhere.

The shrieking fades and I say, "It sounded far away."

Tash nods, her keen eyes searching for any sign of movement in the distance. Atorus opens enormous wings and launches into the air with nothing but immeasurable grace. The great dragon circles around above us for three loops before returning to the ground.

"The creature is far from here," the fire in my head murmurs. "I do not think it will come this way. Even if it does, your group should be long gone before it arrives."

I nod and turn to Tash. "Atorus says it is safe, but we should not linger."

Tash nods and turns to the basket holding Nathaniel. It is almost here, and it is hard not to feel the spark of amusement at the sight of Nathaniel's giant frame in the little basket. He climbs out and dumps his and Tash's backpacks on the ground with a thud before he scoops her in a big hug.

I turn to the tentacle and say, "Please return the basket to the top of the mountain."

Nathaniel turns to me and nods. I return the action and he and Tash set about attaching their backpacks securely, in case we need to leave in a hurry.

Atorus turns to me. "I have protected his mate until he returned. I must go now."

"Thank you," I say. "We will do what we can to make sure the lift cannot be used again before we leave."

Atorus bows to me and the fire in my brain flairs brightly. "You have grown on me puny one. Like an extremely fragile fungus. I wish you luck with your mission." With that, Atorus launches into the sky heading back up the mountain towards Ageth.

Tash looks at me in awe. "The dragon just bowed to you."

I shrug. "I wouldn't read too much into it. Atorus also referred to me as a fungus just moments after bowing."

"A fungus?" Tash repeats scratching her head and glancing up the mountain to see the basket about halfway up.

I nod. "Atorus uses some interesting words to refer to us."

Nathaniel stomps over to the spinning tentacle and takes hold of the leaver. The two turn it together at a much faster rate. Silence falls over our

group as Nathaniel and the tentacle stop spinning the leaver. I turn to squint at Lucas climbing into the basket.

This lift is very efficient. It does in just a few minutes what took us a whole night to get up. We also spent a lot of time running from bats on spiders on the way up. It is not like we were dawdling. It would have been nice to use the lift on the way up. But I suppose we wouldn't have had the necklace to fix it then and couldn't have used it. I shake my head and rub the bridge of my nose. This kind of thinking is not helpful.

Lucas is almost here and clinging on to the sides of the basket for dear life. It appears that I am not the only one with a fear of heights. Lucas tumbles gracelessly out of the basket as Nathaniel all but tips him out of it in his haste to get it traveling back up the mountain. Four bags fall into the sand with him.

"Hey!" Lucas says as he climbs to his feet and brushes himself off. I can see his shaking hands from here.

I go over and help him, and he smiles at me and says, "That was a rough trip you had down the mountain."

The nausea that hadn't completely settled rebels at the idea of thinking about the trip. I nod and point at the bags. "Why four?"

"Melissa and Lexa are going to come down the mountain together, we figured less to balance in the basket was better," Lucas says. He sees the look on my face and adds. "Melissa and Lexa probably barely meet the weight of Nathaniel and it held him."

I glance up at the mountain right as Atorus takes off with Ageth astride him. They circle in the air once and head off over the other side of the mountain. Watching the basket make the long journey back up the mountain is almost painful. Finally, the basket is wiggling on the mountainside as Lexa and Melissa climb in. My heart hammers painfully. Somehow this anxiety is worse than when I was in the basket. Lucas closes his eyes and summons another tentacle to assist the first. Nathaniel steps away from the lift and stands quietly by my side. He says nothing and only stands there, but I feel strangely calmed by his quiet form of reassurance.

In the distance a loud boom echoes through the caverns and the ground under my feet rumbles. I wait, but nothing else happens. I look at Lucas who is staring up at the holes in the cavern roof.

"What was that?" I ask.

“My guess would be more sky rocks. This one didn’t come through, but it was big enough that we still felt it,” Lucas replies.

I look anxiously back at Lexa and Melissa swinging in the basket. “Will there be more?”

“I don’t know much about astronomy,” Lucas says, strapping his backpack on. “But I would guess it is quite possible. The falling sky rocks have been going on for some time now and it is very likely we have crossed paths with something casting this debris at us.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Tash says a tone of unease lacing her voice as she grips the straps of her pack.

“It is not ideal,” Lucas agrees. “But it might be perfectly normal. If our world passes by whatever is throwing this debris at us in some kind of orbit that only meets every so often. Let’s say, every six thousand winters, the race of humans wouldn’t be able to remember it happening last time. It is quite possible our ancestors have lived through this many times before and we wouldn’t know it.”

Tash stares at Lucas with an open mouth. “That is some deep thinking,” she remarks pushing her short hair from her face. “Is your brain always like that?”

Lucas nods his face very serious. “Sometimes I get trapped in my head with thoughts like this.”

I turn towards Lexa and Melissa who are almost safely on the ground. When the basket lands with a crunch in the soft sand, Lexa launches herself out of the basket and takes me in her arms. Her strong arms circling my waist, I gratefully hug her back for a long moment. She pulls away and looks at the blood on my head and chest.

“I healed when I helped Tash use her magic to mend the pole,” I say.

Lexa nods but keeps checking anyway, she pauses, and her vibrant green eyes hold mine. “Are you okay?”

I swallow. We both know she isn’t just asking about the cuts I got in the basket. I glance at the others and back at Lexa. “I will recover.”

I turn to see the little tentacle is now winding the basket back up the mountain without being instructed to do so. It seems the magic is capable of remembering past instructions.

Tash comes to stand beside us, her eyes filled with concern. “Did Claire tell you she also healed Atorus? There was a moment there that seemed very painful.”

Lexa's eyes widen and she turns to me, her eyes running over exposed skin to assess the seriousness of the magical wounds. My cheeks heat up. I was hoping to avoid sharing that particular failure to control my magic.

"How bad is it?" Lexa asks.

"Better than the time I healed Lucas and everyone else in the bat labyrinth," I reply with a forced grin.

"Claire," Melissa says coming to stand beside me. "We were there. So, all that means is you aren't an inch from death after using your magic this time."

I shuffle as the group stare at me, and I fess up. "I have a large wound on my back and my right thigh."

Lexa stoops to dig through her bag and retrieves the healing cream. I roll my eyes and say, "We are in the middle of a desert filled with things that want to eat us. We really should get moving."

Melissa nods. "It is settled. We will get moving after Lexa takes Claire's clothes off and applies the cream." I glare at the wicked grin Melissa sends my way. She adds, "No hanky panky this time, we don't have time for one of your marathons."

Lexa holds out the cream and says, "Take your necklace off."

Sighing, I stuff it into my pocket and Lexa takes hold of my hand, a shimmer of green surrounds us and Melissa moves away to collect her backpack and strap it on.

She looks up at Nathaniel and says, "I bet you wish you had a power that could make you and Tash invisible."

Nathaniel crosses his arms and stares into the distance behaving for all the world like he hasn't heard her.

Lexa moves behind me and places a hand on my waist, slipping it under the shirt, so her fingers run along my skin. "Lift this so I can put the cream on."

I struggle to lift my shirt, the burning pain of my magical wound flaring every time the fabric touches it. Finally, I get the top up around my head and Lexa smears the cream across the wound between my shoulders. I sigh as the cool cream soothes the burning wound. I tug the shirt back down and Lexa comes to stand in front of me. Her hand runs across the skin from my back to my stomach and she hooks her fingers into the front of my pants and tugs.

"These need to come down."

My heart pounds and I cannot believe that here in the middle of a desert filled with predators and our companions just paces away, that my body can want Lexa as much as it does right now.

Something screeches again in the distance, bringing my thoughts soundly back to the situation at hand.

“Are you almost done?” Melissa calls out.

“Yes,” I call back as Lexa kneels in front of me waiting expectantly.

I swallow and pull the pants down revealing a bright blue wound that wraps entirely around my leg. I look at it and tilt my head. “That’s different.”

“Indeed,” Lexa agrees as she applies the cream to my leg. “Perhaps it has something to do with healing a dragon?”

I tug my pants up before my body gives away how strongly I am responding to Lexa’s touch. “Maybe our magic interacted weirdly,” I say.

Lexa removes her hand from my waist, and the green light around us disappears. When I turn to face her, she has two green spots, one on each ear. “It could just be a random wound formation,” she replies.

Lucas brings us our bags and we quickly strap them on. Lexa holds out the cream to Tash who takes it and begins to apply it to her face.

I point at the lift. “I promised Atorus that we would make the lift unusable.”

Nathanial looks over at it and I follow his gaze to the basket that is now almost all the way up the mountain. He draws his sword and with a mighty slash he cuts through the thick rope. It snakes away into the distance, whipping about wildly as the basket plummets to the jagged rocks below and tumbles down them. Chunks rip off and fly in every direction until the basket settles upside down on a spike and settles there.

I can feel the way the blood has drained from my face and Lexa takes me in her arms. Nathanial looks between me and the basket and seems realise he has done something to cause my reaction. He shuffles uncomfortably and then stands between me and the impaled basket so I can no longer see it in the distance.

I turn my head into Lexa’s chest and just stay there for long moments shaking as I try to dismiss the image from my brain that seems to replace the basket with me as it replays the violent tumble.

“Which way now?” Lucas asks after a long silence.

Lexa's jaw clenches. "I am not sure. We have been forced to move on quite quickly."

Tash nods, her eyes suddenly full of realisation. "And we haven't cast the spell to see where we need to go next."

"That was on oversight on my part," Lexa says softly staring out into the sand around us.

I give her a squeeze and step back, making a determined effort not to look at the mountain side again.

"None of us thought to do it." Melissa replies, fastening one of the knives that had come loose near her backpack strap.

Lexa nods and sets off away from the mountain. "It is not safe to cast the magic out in the open like this. We need to find somewhere more secure to use it."

We hurry after her and Lucas asks, "Do you think the next necklace location could be somewhere nice?"

Melissa scoffs. "It is not like we get to pick Lucas."

"I also don't think there are many places down here that could be categorized as nice," I add, thinking about everywhere we have been so far.

"I have heard that on the surface there are places called beaches, where great bodies of water meet the sand. It is supposedly a good place to relax," Lucas continues as if putting the idea in the air will make the last gemstone magically be in that location.

We trudge along the deep sand and away from the looming mountain. My body aches and I am very tired. The terrifying trip down the mountain has really taken it out of me.

"Once we find somewhere to stop, we should also contact Edward," Lexa says thinking out loud as her eyes scan the terrain for somewhere safe to stop. I have been thinking that Leonardo may be willing to trade those feathers Nathaniel collected for transportation of winter clothes. I also think we could provide some of those healing flowers to Travellers Haven in exchange for the clothing."

"That is a good idea," Tash agrees. "There is a man there who makes leather clothing. Or at least there was the last time we were with them."

"Leather would be good to help with the winds that come with the winters down here," Lucas adds.

I glance at Nathaniel and say, "Do you think there is a chance this clothing maker has something in Nathaniel's size?"

"Clothes that size must be made on demand," Melissa says. "I doubt they have something that big laying around."

Nathaniel puffs his chest as if Melissa could not have given any greater compliment than the mention of his abnormally large size.

"Otis is close to Nathaniel's size." Lucas says. "Perhaps he will have some winter clothes he can share?"

"It is worth a try," Lexa agrees as she picks through a long strip of low brambles.

I follow after her and struggle through the spiky bush behind her. The long barbs catch at my pants and boots. The wind picks up and seems to forget it is supposed to blow around me instead of through me. I stuff my hands under my arms as I fight my way through the low brambles. The light in the cavern is fading and I glance up at the hole in the roof to see a dark grey sky. I have no idea what time it is, but it shouldn't be dark yet. Surely it didn't take us a whole day to get down the mountainside.

A loud clap thunders around us and I feel the rumble in my feet and a weird flash momentarily lights up the space around us.

Melissa twists and stares up at the mountain. "I thought the lightning was caused by Tash's necklace."

Tash lifts her necklace off her chest and looks at it twinkling softly in her hand. "It wasn't me."

Another boom and flash sound through my bones and this time I catch a glimpse of light through the hole caused by the sky rock above us. I watch in fascination as a weird mist seems to come through the gap. Something lands on my face, and I wipe it away. My fingers come away wet, and I stare at them as another wet dollop lands on my head.

"Is this water?" I say in confusion.

More drops fall with increasing frequency until we are completely surrounded by them, and I stare up at the whole in the roof as massive freezing droplets land on and around me. I hold out my hands and marvel at the way water fills them, stinging with its coldness. It is almost like the shower at Ageth's, only on a much, much larger scale. I have never seen anything like this.

Lucas takes off his glasses and squints at the sky. "I think," he says slowly. "I think, it's raining."

“It is cold and wet,” Nathaniel grumps. “How long will it last?”

Lucas shrugs. “I don’t know. I have only ever heard about rain. I have never actually seen it.”

Melissa turns and resumes walking calling over her shoulder, “I imagine it is like the rest of nature. It goes until it decides to stop.”

I follow after them and my clothes soon become soaked. The mystery and marvel of the rain quickly becomes replaced with feelings of cold and annoyance. My eyes squint through the rain and try to study the terrain, but all I see are large shadowy lumps that are probably boulders and the blur the heavy rain creates. My eyes land on two lumps in the distance, they are pretty close together and I think we could stretch the hides out across them for some shelter.

I point at it and yell over the rumbling, “Could we use that?”

Lexa turns and follows my finger. “Yes,” She calls back. “That should work.”

Chapter Seventeen

I sit huddled beside Lexa under the makeshift shelter we had built. Fortunately, the two hides had been large enough to stretch across the sloping rocks that had fallen from the cavern roof when one of the sky rocks had punched through. The space isn't large enough for anyone to lay down, but we can all sit comfortably and be relatively dry. Water pours off the hide into a channel Nathaniel had dug in the sand that leads the streaming water away from where we sit hunched.

Another very similar channel had been dug at the front to prevent any of the water that is pooling in the desert sand outside from making the ground beneath us any wetter than it is. The way the water gathers on the sand outside is fascinating, it is like the ground has never had water before and doesn't know what to do with it. If this rain continues, it could very easily become a serious problem. This water isn't being soaked up by the ground and it has to go somewhere.

Sand sticks everywhere, all over my clothes and hands. Once the water is added into the mix it is like the little particles attach firmly to my clothes, and even the best attempts do nothing more than smear the sand across my skin so it can linger some place new. Across from me Tash removes one of the many pouches from her belt and tips the hard leather, water streams out of it into the channel nearby. She carefully filters the water through her fingers and retrieves the little white balls before returning them to the container, fastening it and removing another to repeat the action. Melissa sits beside her with her arms crossed and her hair plastered to the sides of her face.

Lexa digs through her bag and retrieves the little crystals that will let us talk to Edward. She carefully unwraps them and places them in the sand near her knees. Little lights stream from each of the little white crystals and meet in a point, inside the light flickers for a moment before Edward steps into view.

"Ah good evening, Lexa," He pauses and squints at her. "Why are you so wet?"

Lexa sighs. "It is apparently raining."

Edward claps excitedly. "Ooo you are so lucky! It must be coming through the hole above Mt Wolnar. Would you describe the rain for me?"

There is a slight pause before Lexa replies. "It is cold, wet, and everywhere."

I snort and even Melissa who looked ready to murder something only moments before relaxes with a small smile.

Edward nods his eyes twinkling and I can see he wishes desperately to be here with us. "How can I help my lovely Xineoph's?"

"We were hoping to make some exchanges, we are in need of winter clothing," Lexa says. "We would provide a healing plant in exchange."

Edward smiles. "You needn't provide anything to me. I can get you all the clothing. I can see if Leonardo will bring it over." Edward scratches his chin. "However, he usually requires something in exchange. Last time he was interested in meeting you, but he has had that moment now."

"We have feathers we would be happy to exchange," Lexa replies.

Edward nods. "Leonardo does like his extravagant clothing and feathers are rare. It would certainly make him stand out. I think he might agree to it."

"How will he find us?" I ask.

"Hello Claire!" Edward says with a burst of excitement. "I cannot see you and didn't know you were there."

I lean in and use this as an excuse to get as close to Lexa as possible. She loops an arm around me and pulls me closer. "Hi Edward," I reply.

He gives me a brilliant grin. "I think he can find you if you use your magic. When he returned last time, he went on and on about how bright your flames were," Edward says and scratches his beard. "Whatever that means."

I recall the way Eldri and Amder had taught Lexa and I to see the flames when we concentrate in a failed attempt to teach us to dim them. I still remember the brightness of Lexa's when we used the magic in the Elders home. If Leonardo can see us use it, we must look like a beacon. I frown. I wonder if anything else can see us use the magic, it would not be helpful for our enemies to have that ability.

"Can you organise it?" Lexa asks, her voice dragging me back to the conversation.

Edward nods. "He is in Travellers Haven now. He is preparing to leave for Voltren in the morning, but I think for the feathers he would be

happy to make the trip.” Edward claps his hands. “I will speak to him and return to speak with you shortly.”

“Thank you, Edward,” Lexa replies.

He smiles. “Any time.”

With that the picture fades and the little crystals dim. Lexa bunches them together and places them on the cloth beside her. Lucas shuffles and rummages through his bag and pulls out a lump of cheese and loaf of bread.

“Anyone hungry?” He asks.

I lean forward eagerly, and he breaks off a chunk of each for me. I make quick work of it and sit back against the rock, my hunger slightly abated. Lexa wraps her arm around me once more and I relax into her side. Our combined warmth soothing the aches in my body and helps me relax for the first time since this morning. I close my eyes and try to sleep, but the pounding of the rain on the hide, the sand under my clothes and the howling wind makes it impossible to do anything but doze.

A weird vibrating pulls me back to full consciousness and I wake to see Lexa carefully arranging the vibrating crystals in a triangle at her feet. Edward reappears in the shining light.

“Hello again!” He chirps happily. “Leonardo has agreed to drop the items off for you, in exchange for the feathers.”

“Excellent,” Lexa replies. “When should we expect him?”

“Now. He wants you to use magic now so he can find you.”

Lexa nods. “Thank you again Edward.”

He grins broadly and the light fades. Lexa packs away the crystals in her bag and turns to me with an apologetic smile. Groaning I fish the necklace from my pocket and as soon as my fingertips touch the smooth surface of the gem, green and blue light burst around us and the rest of our little group.

“Hey,” Tash says perking up. “Your magic blocks the wind.”

I nod as a little burning pinprick opens up on my foot. “Do you think Leonardo can find us in here if we are invisible and he cannot get in?”

Suddenly beside us is the tall form of Leonardo looking positively astounded to find himself standing in the rain. He stares up at the sky through the hole in the cavern roof, his immaculate suit slowly soaking all the way through.

I remove my hand from the necklace in my pocket and Leonardo's keen blue eyes take in the scene of us huddled under two hides in the rain. He steps under our shelter and squeezes in beside me, plopping a huge bulging bag between his feet. As he shuffles in beside me, I realise he smells sort of musky, it is not unpleasant.

"I love the smell of rain," he says in his deep voice as he gazes out into the desert.

I raise an eyebrow and try to focus on the smell. That's when I realise everything smells much stronger, the sand, the wet hide, everything blends together in a way that is refreshing.

"I hadn't noticed," I reply staring out at the pounding droplets outside our little shelter. "But it is lovely."

Leonardo turns to us. "Good evening, I hope you are well," he says in his deep voice as he does the best he can to smooth the front of his already rumpled suit. This black suit is flawless. Except for the sand clinging to his highly polished shoes and the places where he sits in the wet grains. I don't know where he gets these clothes, but they always seem to fit him perfectly and show off his slim waist, long legs, and broad shoulders.

"Hello Leonardo. We are well, thank you." Lexa replies.

Leonardo nods and holds up the bag. "I have brought you the clothes you asked for."

We all shuffle in the small space as the bag is passed around me and given to Lexa. She pulls a well-made coat partially out of the bag. "Thank you, Leonardo. This will make a huge difference to our travels."

Lexa looks at Nathaniel who begins to dig through his bag without a word looking for the bundle of feathers. Leonardo is staring intently at Tash.

"I see you have a fourth," Leonardo says.

Lexa's eyes flick between them. "Yes, we found what we were looking for on the mountain."

Leonardo nods. "I am going to the capital tomorrow and I will be unavailable for some time. Is there anything else you require from Travellers Haven?"

Lexa shakes her head. "I do not think we could transport more than we are presently carrying. However, the offer is appreciated."

Nathaniel holds out the wrapped bundle to Leonardo and grunts, "Why would someone who is supposedly on the run from Darkmor

willingly go into the capital?”

Leonardo looks at him for a long time, his beautiful yellow skin glitters with beads of water. “Because I have just discovered my husband is still alive and I am going to retrieve him.”

There is a long pause and only the pounding rain fills it.

“Leonardo,” Lexa says gently. “That sounds like a trap.”

Leonardo runs his long fingers through his perfectly styled hair. “I know,” He groans. “And yet, I cannot bear the idea of leaving him there.” He thumps his fists into his thighs in a surprising show of aggravation instead of the normally calculated actions I had come to expect from him. “I would never have left if I thought Galred was still alive. What he must have endured because of my treason.”

I place my hand over his and magnificent blue eyes turn to me, they shimmer with unshed tears. I grip his fingers. “It sounds like you love him very much.”

Leonardo smiles and looks at his knees, his deep voice wavers slightly as he says, “I do.”

Thunder claps loudly above us and the ground beneath me vibrates in response. Lexa silently starts handing out coats to everyone while we give Leonardo a moment to himself. I take the heavy coat, some kind of white fur lines the edges. It is really nice, I am sure our travels will find a way to ruin it somehow though. I shimmy into the coat and already feel warmer, the heavy hide falls all the way to my knees and the warm white fur around the edges keeps my neck and wrists warm.

Leonardo tucks the feathers into his suit without even checking them and I get the feeling the need for payment for his help was a ruse. Something to keep up appearances for the lofty, incredibly well styled image Leonardo had created for himself.

He brushes himself off and announces, “I must be off.”

I stop him as he rises to his feet and say, “I hope you find Galred.”

Leonardo smiles at me with perfect white teeth. “I hope you find what you are looking for. Reach out when you are ready to take on Darkmor. I will do what I can to ensure your success.”

I nod and he disappears with a loud crack.

“If he goes to the capital he is as good as dead,” Nathaniel remarks in a surprisingly soft voice.

I nod. “I understand though.”

Nathanial stares out into the falling rain. "Me too."

Lexa quietly takes out the ingredients Edward had supplied and pours a small amount into a divot in the rock beside her. She looks inside the bag and frowns. I take it from her, and I can see it is empty.

"Can we use less?" I ask.

Lexa bites on her lower lip in thought. "I don't think so. This is already much less than Edward used."

"How are we supposed to find the last necklace without the spell?" Melissa asks.

"The same way we found Edward," Lexa replies. "It will be harder, but I do not think it will be impossible."

She unfolds the now very worn map and takes off her necklace. Lucas, seeing what she is doing leans in and with his flint sends a spark at the crushed mix that causes it to light and send soft wisps of fragrant smoke throughout our little shelter.

Lexa holds her necklace above the map and says, "you are lost, but not for long, show us where the missing crystal has gone."

The crystal flies out of her hand and lands on the map. Leaning in I can see it has landed next to a huge lake, with a terrifying looking serpent emerging out of it chewing on a very human looking leg. The words next to the lake read 'Goulrest.' The lake is half in and half out of the forbidden zone. I guess we will get to look at it for ourselves.

Melissa leans forward and huffs. "Lucas, it looks like you will be getting large bodies of water and sandy shores. I have a feeling that it won't be as relaxing as you were hoping though."

Lucas pushes his glasses up his nose. "Probably not," he agrees.

Lexa puts all the items away and sits back beside me. "We have a long way to go, the trip from here to Goulrest is not a short one." Everyone nods and she adds, "We should rest."

Nathanial readjusts so he is sitting more upright, his head only a handspan from the sagging hide above him. "I will take first watch."

Melissa wriggles so she is as reclined as possible in the small space. "Wake me for the second."

"We shall be last then," Lexa says looping an arm around me and pulling me against her so I can lean on her instead of the rock. It is certainly more comfortable.

I close my eyes and with the warm coat and the security of Lexa beside me I am able to finally succumb to my exhaustion and I drift off to sleep.

When I awake it is bright and the thundering of many feet startle me awake. Lexa squeezes me tightly and whispers, “Shh.” In my ear.

I turn to look out of our makeshift tent to see enormous blue creatures rush past, many hooves thunder and they rush past in a blur. The glimpses I do get are of enormous, twisted antlers, slight nimble bodies, and lots and lots of heads.

One of the creatures is knocked over by another stampeding beside it and two heads swivel around as the scaly body clumsily tries to get off the ground as others in the herd rush past it. The creature has long skinny legs that end in hooves, each of the four legs are well muscled and covered in brilliant blue scales. One of the heads turn our way and I really hope all the dust being kicked up by its companions keeps us concealed. Its narrow head has side facing eyes that dart everywhere showing the whites as it scrambles to get to its feet. Each of the heads supports ridiculously big antlers and it seems the weight is actually causing the creature to struggle further. Finally, it climbs to its feet and bursts off with the thinning herd. There must have been hundreds of them.

I turn to Lexa who raises a single finger to her lips, and I notice what I didn't the first time. A mighty roar mingles with the pounding of hooves and a pack of cerebi race past our hiding place after the herd fading in the distance. Their bodies are leaner than the one I had encountered after my escape from the compound. They seem faster, and well-conditioned for chasing prey, their many heads snap at the feet of the blue creatures as they flee in terror.

I swallow heavily and sit in silence for long minutes before Lexa whispers, “I think they are gone.”

Lucas shuffles quietly beside us. “Wild cerebi,” he mutters. “That is a thought to keep you awake at night.”

Melissa quietly moves a pack behind us and begins searching through it. “The herd of ultina is more unusual,” she says, retrieving her water canteen and a handful of fist sized green fruits, she hands one to me and I take it. “They must have escaped from a farm. I didn't think there were any that roamed free.”

Lexa turns to Melissa. “How likely is it that the cerebi come back if their hunt is unsuccessful?”

Melissa finishes handing out the fruit. “We should go.” Is all the answer she supplies.

Everyone hurriedly packs up and the soaking hide is wrapped into a bundle, I struggle to lift a sodden square of leather and turn to Lexa. “Carrying this will exhaust us.”

She eyes the hides and says, “Leave them.”

“What if we need them again?” Lucas asks staring at the hides that had kept us dry last night like we owe them something.

“Speed is crucial here,” Melissa says. “We do not need shelter if we are dead. Carrying those will slow us down. If we are lucky the cerebi will be so distracted by it that they won’t pursue us.”

“Do you think that is likely?” Tash asks as we set off at a brisk pace.

“A girl can hope,” Melissa replies. “A better hope is that they caught an ultina, that will keep them busy for a while.”

We struggle through the sand for many hours, we dodge large fallen rocks and pick through low brambles that are so thick it was almost like a very spiky ground cover. I scuff through the deep sand and struggle to pull my feet from the grains that swallow it with each step. I think it is the sand that makes this walk feel so long, the way it makes each step a struggle is exhausting. I glance behind us, a habit I had picked up this morning when I kept compulsively checking to see if we were being pursued by the group of cerebi. Nothing is there except our blazing trail of footsteps and the mountain which is much smaller but no less looming behind us. The cerebi haven’t returned and the only thing I can conclude is that they caught an ultina and are much more interested in it than us. I am very grateful for its unknowing sacrifice.

“Look in the distance,” Tash says pointing. “It looks like plants of some kind.”

I squint at it. It is possible. It could also be more rocks. We are no longer under a hole in the cavern roof, but I am learning the last destructive wave of sky rocks that collapsed the bat labyrinth caused many chunks of rock to fall from the cavern roof, littering the ground everywhere.

I don’t look forward to any further barrages. I honestly don’t know how much more the roof of the cavern can take. I am also fairly sure that

if the cavern roof comes down, the odds of survival aren't high. I suspect the only thing keeping it up now is the magic that traps Darkmor down here, and even it is currently failing.

A weird boulder catches my attention and I swear it ripples in the breeze. I blink and rub my eyes. Boulders don't ripple. But even as I watch, it does it again. I lower my hand to the hilt of my sword, something in my gut hates every step we take towards the mysterious bolder. Lexa notices my movement and her eyes follow mine.

She too raises her hand to the hilt of the sword on her hip. "Be ready," she says quietly to the group.

Suddenly a scream pierces the air and out of the suspicious boulder rushes six armed goblins and a tall handsome human with jet black hair. The tall man crosses his arms and smiles with amusement as the goblins rush at us with their weapons raised.

I draw my sword and drop my backpack in the sand with a thud as I engage a yellow brown goblin with more teeth than his mouth can fit. He swings a massive metal mace at me, and I dodge it, spinning in the sand and coming at the monster from behind. I slash my sword and clip the shoulder of the goblin right as it spins and pulls something from a pouch on its loin cloth.

I crouch right as a knife is thrown at me and it whistles over my head. The goblin bellows and rushes at me with the mace held high and I am forced to roll through the sand and out of the way as he swings it. The heavy mace smashes into the rock that was behind me and practically obliterates it. I eye the long-wicked spikes on the mace and very much doubt I could survive a single hit from it.

The goblin tries to pull the heavy mace from where it is imbedded in what remains of the rock. The mace doesn't budge, the long spikes having deeply impaled the rock beneath it and hold fast. The goblin gives it one last mighty tug before he realises it will take more time than he has to remove it. A green hand reaches into a pouch and flings another star shaped blade at me.

I spin in the sand and kick a large quantity in the air in a burst of particles and my goblin claws at his face, and I make quick work of him. I turn to help Lexa as the mouldy green goblin swishes the massive, spiked club at her. She darts out of the way and stabs into the goblin's chest, the goblin looks at it surprised and drops the heavy mace in the sand as he

crumples. Behind her Nathaniel picks up a goblin and actually throws it into a second while Lucas and Tash work together to fight off a spotty brown and orange goblin. A red one already lays dead in the sand, a knife in the back of its head.

Melissa pulls a knife and throws it at the spotty goblin and the knife imbeds into the creature's eye. I look over at Tash, Lucas, and Melissa who have turned to assist Nathaniel and I cannot help but think the three of them have a very good system.

Lexa pulls her sword from the dead goblin at her feet, looks up and her face falls as her eyes land on something behind me. I spin on my heel and come face to face with another Lexa.

She raises her hand and gently strokes her fingers down the side of my face. "I have been waiting for you Claire."

I step back and stare between the two Lexa's in confusion.

The Lexa who had just killed the goblin yells, "Get away from her."

"I don't want too," says the new Lexa reaching for my hand, her fingers brush mine and I move my hand away filled with uncertainty. "She will be returning to safety with me."

The other Lexa snarls and the two engage in a blur of swords. The two swing their swords in a beautiful deadly dance, each as skilled as the other. I stand stupidly, trying to keep track of which Lexa is my Lexa.

My Lexa sends another blur of blows and clips the other in the arm. She shouts, "Stop wearing my face."

"You are wearing my face," The injured Lexa insists.

A thud startles me, and a goblin falls dead at my feet. I turn to find a knife in the back of its head and Melissa with her arm still in the air as her eyes land on the scene of the two women fighting. I turn back and I have lost track of who is who. Both women now sporting the exact same arm injury.

"This isn't good," Lucas's voice comes from behind me.

"Can we help?" Tash asks wiping a bloodied hand on her pants and leaving a green smear across the leather.

Nathaniel stands tense. "How? Which is which?"

A sword flies in the air and lands in the sand nearby as one of the Lexa's is disarmed. The armed Lexa advances and my stomach tightens in worry and confusion as the Lexa with the sword swings. The unarmed Lexa ducks the blow, steps in close and punches the armed Lexa in the

face. The armed Lexa stumbles back and wipes a stream of blood from her nose.

Every muscle in my body is tense and I stare between the two Lexa's desperately trying to figure out which is my Lexa. Everything is the same, the way they fight, the braids, the mannerisms. How is it possible that there is two?

"Imposter," The Lexa with the bleeding nose spits.

"You are the one wearing my face," The unarmed Lexa replies with her fists up ready to strike again.

The armed Lexa tries again, swinging her sword in a mighty arc. The unarmed Lexa dodges the blow again and delivers a series of tight punches to the stomach and side of the attacker.

"Claire, who is who?" Melissa asks holding a knife in her hand ready to throw.

I stare between the two Lexa's. The Lexa with the bloodied nose points at the unarmed Lexa and says, "She is the imposter."

The other Lexa simply looks at me, she doesn't say a word, but her eyes filled with warmth and a feeling rises in me that I have only ever felt with Lexa. A certainty spreads through my body as my eyes lock with hers. I glance back at the armed Lexa who is staring at me with a calculated expression.

I point at the armed Lexa. "She is the fake Lexa."

The armed Lexa looks shocked. "Claire can you not see it is me?"

"Claire are you sure?" Melissa asks, stress and fear evident in her face.

I look back at the unarmed Lexa who smiles gently at me.

"I am sure," I say.

Melissa pulls back her arm and the armed Lexa pleads. "Melissa it is me."

Melissa hesitates and I see confusion flicker across her face.

The unarmed Lexa pulls a dagger from her boot and plunges it into the neck of the fake Lexa. The sword drops from her hand, and she falls to the ground gurgling, and I am filled with a sense of pain watching even a pretend Lexa die. Her body begins to ripple and weird waves transform her face and body horribly. Her arm takes on the shape of a goblins and the head changes and becomes a white lizard, many other shapes and faces flash by before the shifting creature collapses into a heap on the ground

and settles into the sand. I eye the small white creature with enormously big eyes and a long-pointed tail as it lays dead at Lexa's feet.

Lexa steps over the creature and in three steps she has me in her arms holding me tight. "Thank you, Claire."

I squeeze her back. "Only you look at me that way."

Nathanial stomps up to the creature and looks down at it in disgust. "An Eleeza."

Lexa and I separate, and we look over the bodies spread around us. I had wondered when Darkmor would try harder to get me. If the magic is failing, and my blood, The Great Taliah's blood, is the only thing that can seal it back up, it was only a matter of time before he tried again.

Melissa heads to the shifting boulder, lifts the flap and stares inside. She is rigid for a long moment, her arm ready to release a knife at a moment's notice.

She relaxes and calls back, "There are no more."

Lexa releases me and follows Melissa into the weird rock shaped dome. I follow her into the space and am astounded by how large it is. It doesn't look this big from the outside. Just a few blankets and bags are spread across the sandy floor, it looks like they have been staying here for some time.

Nathanial looks at the canvas around us. "This is a very expensive tent. There are not many of these."

"They were looking for me," I say looking around at the space. "It is like they were waiting. How did they know we would be here?"

"Luck," Melissa suggests.

"Maybe they have a seer?" Lucas says.

I turn to face him, and Lexa runs her hands through her hair. "I do not like that suggestion at all."

"If they have a seer," Tash says inspecting a weird panel on the wall closely. "This will get a lot harder."

"It is already harder," Nathanial says. "Sending Eleeza's after Claire means we can trust no one."

Lexa moves through the litter around us. "This looks like it has been up for some time. It seems even if they knew we would come by, they did not know when."

"With the magic in the cavern fading, I think these kinds of ambushes will increase," I say rubbing the bridge of my nose.

Melissa plops to the ground and pulls some food from her bag and I sit down beside her and take the lump of meat she offers.

Lexa puts her hands on her hips and stares out the opening of the tent. “It is quite possible that Darkmor is aware of what we are up to if he has a seer.”

Nathanial kneels and digs through Tash’s bag. “They cannot be a good seer. There weren’t many assailants stationed here. That makes me think they were not positive we would come by. Otherwise Darkmor would have put the whole damn army here.”

“Well at least we only need to find two more necklaces,” Lucas says and takes a sip from his water canteen.

Something bright red flashes in Tash’s bag and lights Nathanial up brightly. His eyes widen in disbelief as he peers into the bag, slowly retrieving his hand. Nestled within his grasp is the very wooden box we had discovered deep within the bat labyrinth. Only now, its lid is slightly ajar, emanating a mesmerizing stream of crimson light. Within the box, two exquisite red love hearts dangle from delicate chains, casting enchanting rays of light that transform the room into a dazzling spectacle of dancing red hues.

Tash looks at Nathanial in surprise. “You are the owner?”

He shrugs and goes to pick up one of the necklaces.

“Stop!” Lexa commands coming to stand beside us.

Nathanial’s hand freezes mid-air and he looks up. “What?”

“One is real, and one is not,” Lexa recites. “I used to know but I forgot. Choose now wisely or you will see, you will end up just like me.”

Lucas nods. “Yeah, the guy in the bat labyrinth was very dead. Better pick carefully.”

Nathanial looks back at the box. “Well, it is obviously the one that is glowing.”

I look into the box, both necklaces are glowing brightly, red light streams out of them.

I look back at Lexa and say, “To me they both glow. Maybe only the owner can tell them apart?”

Nathanial reaches in and grasps the tiny love heart gem in his massive hand. The moment he touches it, the other stops glowing and turns black. It glitters menacingly in the box. Red light pours from Nathanial’s hand, and he squints at it before turning to look at us.

“A love heart?” He grunts outraged.

“I cannot believe we have been carrying around the fifth necklace this whole time,” I say in disbelief as I stare at the gem glittering in Nathaniel’s hand.

Lucas leans forward to peer necklace and says, “The note did say Keeper. But even I never would have guessed it was a necklace. I thought it was perhaps a note for where the next Keeper was, or a map.”

“It is clever,” Lexa says. “If you knew you would likely perish before you could pass the necklace on, sealing it in a box with magic is a sound way to ensure it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands.”

“What was he doing in the bat labyrinth then?” Tash asks. “Seems like a good place to visit if you are trying to die.”

I chew my lip. “Maybe he was trying to get to Ageth?”

Nathaniel nods. “It was no secret she had great power. Even during my time in the palace decades after hers, I knew of it.”

“Perhaps he guessed she too was guardian of a necklace,” Lexa concludes.

“Maybe his necklace was killing him,” I say sadly. “They don’t seem to be very nice to their Keepers.”

Silence falls over the small space and I look at Nathaniel who still stares at the gem in his hands. It twinkles happily and he looks at it with a strange level of disappointment.

“Are you going to put it on?” Lucas asks.

Nathaniel glances up at him. “What?”

Lucas pauses for a moment before saying. “Necklaces are usually worn.”

Nathaniel looks back at the love heart in his fist. “You want me to wear the love heart necklace?” He says, his voice filled with layers of annoyance.

“It is your necklace,” I say gently. “It chose you.”

Tash raises a hand to Nathaniel’s arm. “It does not make you any less manly.”

He looks back at it and grunts, “I know that.” He still hesitates and there is a long tense moment before he finally loops it over his head.

“Do you want to see what it can do?” I ask.

He looks at me and nods. I hold out a hand and he slowly lifts his and grasps it. Red and blue light erupts in the small space, and I feel a weird

tingling through my muscles. I haven't felt anything like this since the needle that medic gave me at my last Arena match. Sadness fills me as I think of the welts on her face and then my traitorous mind spirals to thoughts of my last meeting with my mother. I blink away tears. It is like my mind is determined to be sad.

Nathanial looks at me and frowns, a red line opening on his neck. "You are sad."

"That is usually what tears mean Nathanial," Melissa says staring up at us from her place on the floor.

I let go of his hand and the light falls away. "Sorry," I say brushing away tears. "We can try again in a moment."

"No," says Nathanial slowly. "It is not the tears. I feel the sadness. I feel a pain in my chest, the loss." He looks at me and adds as a tear rolls down his cheek, "The sense of failure." Suddenly he pulls off his necklace and holds the gem at arm's length. "I do not like it," he grunts.

I frown. "Those are my feelings," I say. "I was just thinking of my mother and someone I had caused a great deal of pain."

Lucas readjusts his glasses and says slowly, "You were feeling Claire's emotions?"

Melissa seems positively astounded. "It is weird that the necklace gives the most emotionally stunted person I have ever met, the ability to feel others' emotions."

I look at Nathanial and ask, "Do you feel anyone else's emotions?"

He slowly takes the gem in his hand and looks around. "No,"

"Maybe it only works on contact?" Lucas suggests.

Lexa nods and says, "Try touching Tash."

Nathanial reaches out and takes Tash's hand. A broad smile spreads across his face as she looks up at him. The gem in his fingers glittering brightly.

"I feel it," he says simply.

Nathanial and Tash stare at each other for long moments and I avert my eyes on what is obviously a private moment.

"Well, it seems like Nathanial's power is empathy," Lucas says scratching his nose. "What is the combined power?"

I shrug. "I felt all tingly when we touched. Like pins and needles were everywhere, but it was in my muscles, not my skin."

"That sounds uncomfortable," Melissa replies.

Nathanial crosses his arms. "I assure you, it was more uncomfortable for me."

Lexa casts him a glance. "I think it is important for you to remember that you were feeling Claire's emotions. At least you have the ability to drop those feelings when you let go of her hand. She carries those feelings with her everywhere."

Nathanial's face falls. It is obvious that the thought hadn't occurred to him before Lexa had said it out loud. He looks at me with something almost like sympathy.

I smile at him. "Maybe we could try again later."

He nods and slips the necklace back around his neck. The glittering red gem seems ridiculously small around his muscular neck.

"Well," I say. "One more gem to go."

Lexa nods. "And a long walk until we get there."

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